

interzone

APRIL 2000

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'Lord Soho'
Richard Calder



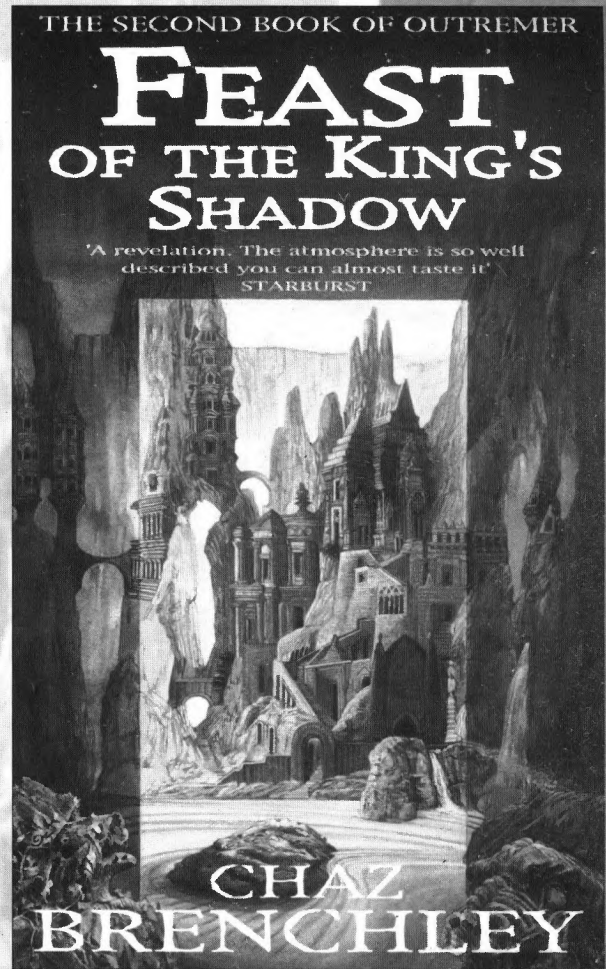
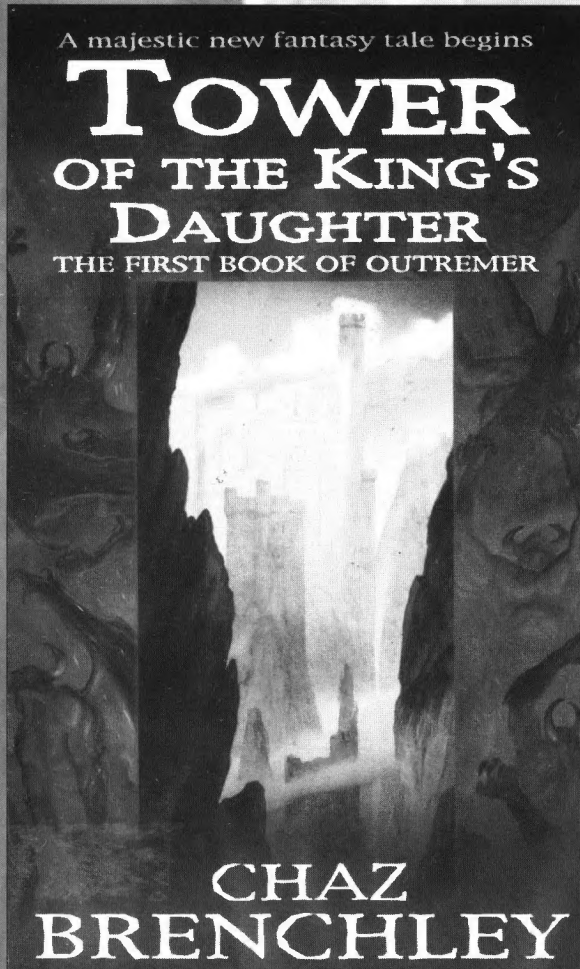
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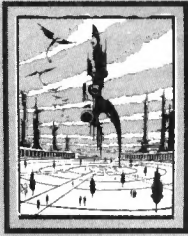
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interzone

science fiction & fantasy

APRIL 2000

Number 154

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Dear Editors:

In the interests of balance, a dystopian antidote to Bruce Sterling's embarrassingly New Age "Manifesto of January 3rd 2000" (*Interzone* 152) is surely required. Beginning with the frankly wrong assertion that the evils of the 20th century were "merely a historical circumstance" – Nazism and Stalinism were evils that grew from particular human minds, attracting followers with disturbingly little difficulty – and making his way, via clouds of windy rhetoric, to the conclusion that creativity is the future – comforting for one who makes a living creatively – Sterling's clarion call doesn't so much inspire as incite.

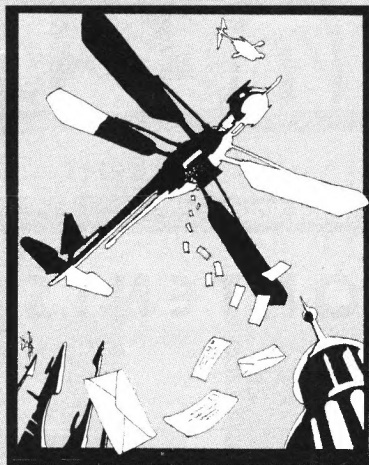
Sterling looks forward to an educated, creative, technologically advanced 21st century. It's a persuasive vision if you happen to be living in a First World country, trading Utopian technobabble with Bill Gates wannabes. But much of the world is still too grindingly poor and/or war-ravaged to join in the celebrations, with fundamentalist Moslem countries deriding technology, Africa suppurating under debts to more "civilized" nations and the street urchins of South America still waiting to utilize their creativity.

And even when Sterling has world poverty licked, there is the problem of human nature to overcome. Human beings are creatures of bone, blood and sinew, motivated more by greed, lust and lassitude than altruism or creativity. To see what the uncreative masses of people want to do with technology, take a look at the profusion of internet porn and the growth in cybercrime. Like many others, Sterling thinks technology is somehow redemptive, that it will enoble us. That's tantamount to claiming that trading up your computer will make you a better writer. Like Plato, he seems to believe that the world wants to be ruled by creative philosopher kings operating ivory networks, when we're really all just punters, itching for the chance of virtual sex with Marilyn Monroe.

The speed at which technology is currently moving has led to a kind of hysterical euphoria among creative thinkers. Deluded that they're living in an sf future, they ignore the insipid quality of modern technological experience, overpraising it because it because its bright little on-screen world bolsters their egos and saves them having to look at the world outside. Meanwhile, in real reality, the silos are still full of nuclear bombs, eugenics becomes a practical science and the overcrowded Earth rushes to exhaust its resources.

This dystopian's manifesto? Enjoy the hiatus in man's doomward plunge while you still can, because unless someone is designing a better user, technology isn't going to save us.

Adrian Fry
Swindon, Wiltshire



INTERACTION

Dear Editors:

I really enjoyed the Michael Moorcock issue (#151). I read *The Warhound and the World's Pain* in 1998 while waiting for jury duty (the library had thoughtfully provided books for jurors); having read the book until I was told I didn't have to serve, I can honestly say that the Montgomery County Government paid me to read Michael Moorcock!

I'm still not cyber, but when I am I will be sure to join the "Fictionmags" listserv. I am fascinated by the history of magazines. I was pleased to learn from the Moorcock piece that the ghost of *The Strand Magazine* survives in at least one publication. And I will have to see if the Library of Congress has a run of *Liliput*. I know they have *The Strand*, because I once wasted several hours looking at Heath Robinson drawings when I should have been working ...

Martin Morse Wooster
Silver Spring, Maryland

Dear Editors:

After reading Paul Brazier's review of *Prospero's Children* in issue 152, I feel compelled to write and question his Young Adult labelling of this book. To be fair, *Interzone* is not the first place I've seen *Prospero's Children* reviewed in an adult magazine as a children's book (perhaps the lower cover price confuses reviewers?). But I have yet to see this fantasy on the children's shelves in a bookshop, and have heard on the grapevine that it is indeed an adult book and a lead title – hence the lower price. I've checked in my local Waterstones and Ottakers, where *Prospero's Children* is prominently displayed on the fantasy & science fiction shelf, and the very fact it is sent to magazines such as *Interzone*, *Dreamwatch* and *Starburst* for review surely hints that it isn't being aimed at children? I haven't seen it in *Books for Keeps* yet.

I'd be interested to know what Jan Siegel herself thinks of the young adult

label. As a new writer of children's fantasy, I'm only just beginning to realize how enormous is the mental barrier between young adult books and adult genre books – not only in terms of bookshop shelving, but as far as reviews and reader perception goes. With *Prospero's Children*, you might have made a mistake in the labelling, but at least you still thought it worth a review – and I note a genuine children's book that has been in *Books for Keeps* (*Storm Chaser* by Paul Stewart and Chris Riddell) is reviewed on the very next page.

I applaud any attempt by magazines like yours to bring to our attention books marketed for older children that an adult reader might enjoy. For my own part, I am ashamed to discover how many excellent fantasies I've missed over the past 20 years, simply because I thought I was "too old" to browse the children's section of the bookshop, and because the genre magazines I read had ignored these gems. It is only recently, with books like J. K. Rowling's popular "Harry Potter" series and Philip Pullman's excellent "His Dark Materials" trilogy, that such enjoyable and innovative fantasies have been brought to the attention of an adult readership. To my mind, this crossover is a much-needed blast of fresh air that prevents our genre from stagnating. Please, please do keep bringing such hidden gems to your readers' attention!

Katherine Roberts
Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire

Paul Brazier replies: *Contrast the fate of Ben Jeapes's excellent sf novel His Majesty's Starship. This wasn't written for children but, because it was published by Scholastic Press, I found it in the children's section of Waterstones. Anyway, I didn't see the advance publicity for Prospero's Children, but it was listed in our "Books Received" as a young-adult novel, and that is probably where I got the idea from. This was reinforced by the fact that the central character is a 14-year-old girl. Also, the book is a beautifully produced artefact, with wonderful design and printing. No one puts this much work into presenting books for adults any more...*

Dear Editors:

Can I take issue with the second paragraph of Paul Brazier's column in *IZ* 152? He writes of a selection of fantasy novels, "The first thing to notice is that the gamut of plot variations is quite small. Characters will either: discover long-lost fathers... set out on quests to restore or reinforce the old ways; or search for McGuffin-like keys of power. Given this paucity of plots, what is left to entertain us is the decoration of invention, and execution."

First, if you reduce plots to their basic structures in this way, you could find a paucity across all kinds of literary works. *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* are both

plays about the downfall of usurpers but they do not have the same plot. Often what makes an interesting plot depends on how the end is achieved (or fails to be achieved) rather than what it is, as many detective stories demonstrate.

Secondly, what should be left to entertain us apart from the plot is much more than decoration or execution. Character, atmosphere, the portrayal of social relationships and values, metaphors for different aspects of the human psyche: in other words, most of the things that make fantasy worth reading.

Sandra Unerman
London

Paul Brazier replies: *Those three plots featured in all five books under review. My point was simply that as all three plots are such well-worn clichés to begin with – plays about the downfall of usurpers are probably less common – it did not bode well. This is not to say that using a tired cliché as the basis of a book is a sin in itself – fantastic fiction is almost entirely made up of reworkings of previous ideas. But what becomes important at this point is how the writer carries off the story – and the phrase “decoration and execution” was intended to convey “everything else apart from plot.” A hackneyed plot needs to be flagged as such because the revelation can be a disappointment. Once this is done, the relative merits of such books in the other areas of storytelling can be discussed, and I hope my enthusiasm for some of these books demonstrates that they are still worth reading, despite their plots.*

Dear Editors:

I would like to throw out a thought about the print fonts and design of sf novels, to you and your readership.

If you flick through a quick selection of sf novels on any bookshop shelf, you'll find that most of them have been printed in serif fonts.

There was a time before DTP when just a relatively small handful of fonts existed, compared to today, and all layouts were handset. Looking through some old sf of mine, the layouts are cramped and mucky, and moreover it's all in serif. Just like everything else was. Consequently, as I associate serif with the pre-hi-tech world, the sans-serif font has become a mark of the new... and as sf is so often concerned with the new, or the future, especially those that examine the point where the present is becoming (or is) the future (like cyberpunk), the sans-serif font complements these works more, in particular.

Of course there are new and innovative serif fonts that complement sf well and have been used to do so; but in general, the serif font and its layouts still either hark back to our old, uninspired typesetting traditions or goes to the opposite extreme and rockets into glar-

ing, DTP-kitsch. I want to open a book and find a typeface that is as aesthetically complementary as the choice of the author's own words.

My simple point is that, in certain contexts, sans-serif fonts are overlooked; that the fonts used do not represent the spirit or feeling of their content; and that consequently, the sentimental impact of the novel, and the simple pleasure of the reading experience itself, suffers because of this.

To mention two good examples: a special edition of Bruce Sterling's *Heavy Weather* came out just over a year ago which had beautiful, clean layouts and a sans-serif font. Like a smart businessman, it looked like what it was selling. It could almost have been chucked out of the crystalline brain of an AI. By a little contrast, the new Penguin edition of Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* has a beautiful, minimalistically-designed cover in blank white with embossed dots, which is great for a new generation of Dick readers as a necessary departure from all those cherished Foss spaceships, chrome and airbrushing, I think... except for the fact that one is a little disappointed to discover, on opening Dick's novel, a fuzzy lithograph of a former imprint inside (in serif).

All of the new “SF Masterworks” series (from Millennium) are also like this, unfortunately. Obviously, lithography keeps down the price of reproducing out-of-print works; but for new works, there is less excuse. Sf is a literature of ideas – let's use some. How do others feel?

S. Higgins
Colchester, Essex

Paul Brazier replies: *When printing was invented in Germany in the 1450s, the type used was Black Letter (the Daily Telegraph bannerhead is a well-known example). At the beginning of the Renaissance, the Italians designed a more elegant type based on original Latin manuscripts. This became known as “Roman” type. This was the first serif typeface, now known as “Old Style.” The first sans serif typefaces appeared around 1815, and became known as “grotesques” because they were so ugly. They were quickly followed by slab serif, or “Egyptian” typefaces, and the Victorian age subsequently gave birth to many more*

Erratum

The caption of this picture in IZ152, pg 57 incorrectly identifies the gentleman with Steve Jones (right) as Ron Chetwynd-Hayes. Steve informs us that it is, in fact, Basil Copper. Our apologies to all concerned.



abominations of display type.

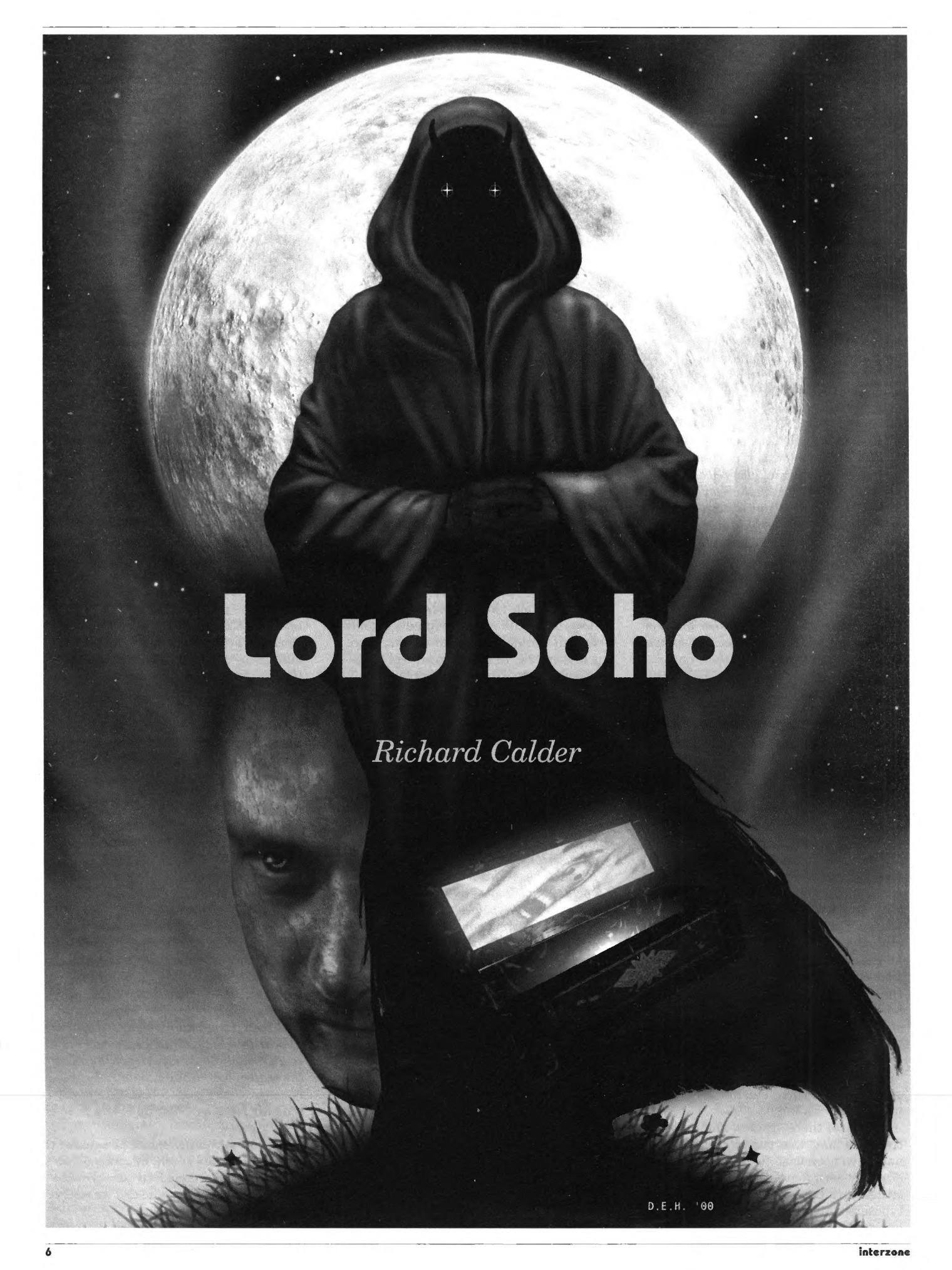
William Morris is generally credited with reviving the art of typography, and since the beginning of the 20th century fashions in type have changed rapidly as foundries revive long-abandoned typefaces and modern typographers are stimulated to modern new versions. In 1926, the Times newspaper had a new typeface designed based on the original old-style Roman from the 15th century, and this is the self-same Times that resides on every computer today. Soon afterwards, the Art Deco period gave rise to many elegant new sans serif typefaces, two of which, Gill Sans and Bauhaus, are used extensively in Interzone today.

The ubiquitous Helvetica and Univers sans serif typefaces were designed in the utilitarian 1950s and look it, and there was very little new work until Aldo Novarese invented semi-casual type in the 1970s. Nowadays, via DTP and digital type, the type from all periods of history is available to any user. The semi-casual has come of age, but it should be noted that the leading examples, Stone, Meta, and Scala, are members of vast families that include Serif and Sans versions as well.

How on earth do we choose type that is suited to sf from that lot? My own feeling is that there is something very 1930s about science fiction, that the art deco typefaces of that period suit it well, and that this is why Bauhaus (for headings) and Gill Sans (for captions and books received) are used in IZ. My experiment with using Novarese for SF Nexus and (briefly) for Interzone failed because so many people complained that it was not easy to read. So we settled on the typeface you are reading now solely for its legibility, but I suspect its warm familiarity is the real source of its legibility. Probably, we all learned to read on this typeface – it is called New Century Schoolbook, because that is what it was designed for.

The problem with sans serif typefaces is that they become tiring to read over long passages. Those little tails, invented by the Romans over 2,000 years ago, actually do make reading easier. If you want proof, take a look at Jeff Noon's new book, needle in the groove. It is a nightmare of contemporary design, set all in helvetica extended with no capital letters or full stops/just solidus strokes. Horrible. But it looks dead stylish. My fundamental dictum as a typesetter is that both design and typeface should disappear into the reading experience. The reader should only experience the story. If the reader sees the design, or notices the typeface, then I have failed. But finally I echo Mr Higgins – how do others feel?

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Lord Soho

Richard Calder

D.E.H. '00

On my 21st birthday I killed a man. It was during my maiden speech in the Lords. In those days member privilege not only extended to sexual peccadillos and the kind of malfeasance ruthlessly prosecuted in men of less exalted rank, but to capital crimes, whether committed inside the chamber or out. Given the moral climate that prevailed amongst the Darkling Isle's ruling class, few of us would have escaped the gallows if it had been otherwise.

"Bastard!" I cried, as I pulled the blade free of my swordstick and leaped over the benches towards my foe. The chamber parted, ermine-cloaked fools scurrying for the shadows. "Vermin! Unlettered savage! Dog slobber! Obscurantist! Quack!" The Lord Chancellor's eyes grew wide with astonishment as I vaulted the woolsack and closed upon the man who had traduced me.

Bayswater was five decades my senior and had only recently recovered from a near-mortal illness. But neither grey hairs nor convalescence could dissuade him from keeping his ground. Disdain informed every inch of his bearing. He had not even deigned to draw.

Mindful that his long military career had included victorious campaigns in Northumberland, Mercia and Kent, and that, in his day, he had enjoyed a reputation of being a cunning swordsman, both in and out of a lady's bed, I checked my momentum.

My blood was hot, but I had always been conscientious about who I called out, and the thought that this old warhorse had, perhaps, more mettle than might be supposed, effected a cooling whose rapidity was such that I soon felt a chill extend to my marrow.

"This chamber," said Bayswater, "does not take kindly to being lectured to, especially by a pup who has only, this day, come into his inheritance." He raised a hoary eyebrow and cast a mocking glance about the benches. "Such as it is. For we cannot help but recall that in his veins runs the polluted blood of our enemies."

"You go too far," I muttered. "You will apologize for that remark."

"Too far?" he said. "You have today told us that we must embrace the *new science* –"

"We have on our hands a peasants' rebellion. Nothing more. An insurrection of thralls. The giants of the ancient world would have long settled these continual, petty wars, and so would we, if we only had the courage to study their example. Instead, we fight with swords and musketry. No wonder we cannot consolidate our successes and bring matters to conclusion."

"The *new science*," he continued, ignoring my interpolation, "which all dispassionate men know is merely a euphemism for *diablerie*." I looked around. The red mist that had fallen on first hearing his calumnies had now completely lifted, and I was left with a vision of terrible clarity, the conviction that I would soon be fighting for my life. "Not that we can expect a man such as this," he added, playing to the crowd, "to be able to distinguish the two. After all, his family line is one contaminated by the *diabolical*."

It would, I knew, be necessary to commit myself before sound judgement called the retreat. Retreat – an option I would have gladly embraced in other circumstances –

would earn me, on this my first day in the chamber, the eternal derision of my peers.

I pressed matters home.

"Apologize," I said, "or die." There was a rumble of hostility from the benches to my immediate left, where my opponent's lickspittles had congregated. Farringdon, Kilburn and Aldgate stood with their hands fingering their sword pommels, and Battersea and Kensington, in whom old enmities against my own all-but-extinguished line still burnt bright, fixed me with baleful stares. "I call a spade a spade, sir," said Bayswater, committing himself now, "and, as my duty urges, indeed, demands, I call you a witch, sir, a man of *dubious allegiances*. Remove yourself from this chamber. You have no business with true men."

There were cries of "Hear, hear!" From the tiered benches on either side of me a mass of raised fists underlined what was already obvious: I had won no new friends.

I readied myself.

I fought Eastern style, as my father had taught me to do, and as his father had taught him. I turned and presented my left side to my opponent, an outstretched hand gripping the ebony cane so that I might use it to ward off a blow. I leaned backwards, displacing my weight so that my full 170 pounds was supported by my right leg. My right hand – my sword-hand – was tucked just beneath the hip, the slim, 16-inch blade pointed towards the groin of my prospective attacker. Parry, left kick, right foot forward, thrust. That was the order of things, the ancestral style that had put many a man in the ground.

Bayswater had still not drawn. I studied his face for signs of weakness. But the man was like adamant; there seemed nothing I could exploit. I could only hope, it seemed, that his antique veins were sufficiently adamant for him to be seized by an apoplexy, and that he drop dead upon the spot. I grimaced; bared my sharp little teeth; flared my nostrils and, with an angry flick of my head, let my locks fall over a gunmetal face so heavily lined as to seem a counterpart to my scrotum. My appearance had often benumbed the sword-arm of those I closed upon. But Bayswater had seen the enemy at close quarters. And the countenance of an octoroon whose orc-blood came courtesy of a grandmother whom he had neither met, nor knew much about, did not, it seem, have the power to disconcert him.

"I am as proud of my lineage as any man," I said. "My grandfather was known to some of you here, perhaps even to you, Bayswater. Acknowledge, then: he saved London from being overrun by the armies of the Netherworld!"

"*But not his bed!*" shouted one wag. I glanced about, trying to pick him out from the welter of faces. I could not find him. A pity. For I would have enjoyed making him the day's second kill, if I should be so fortuitous as to make a first.

Bayswater looked at me with restrained condescension. "You, boy, have more cause than most, I think, to appreciate the manner in which the legions of the perverse have impinged themselves upon the world. It is barely a hundred years since we drove their armies into their underground lairs where, licking their wounds, they still lurk, but happily no longer give us trouble. Except, of course,

by way of their proxies left on the Earth's surface. I speak, of course, of *your* kind, Master Pike. Hell's miscegens."

I felt my skin prickle as my blood recalled its patrimony.

"Master no longer," I said. "Today you address me as Lord Soho, or you do not address me at all." I edged forward, my right leg bent, my left leg and arm ready to kick and block, respectively. I swung the blade's tip through a clockwise circle, then repeated the exercise, anti-clockwise. And while I did so, I focused on Bayswater's vitals.

My opponent slipped the ermine casually from his shoulders. The air between us blurred. My wrist went numb, and I sucked in an exorbitant amount of air, hoarding it in my lungs for long seconds, in the unconscious hope, perhaps, that it might provide an anodyne to the terrific pain that had begun to course along my arm. My blade clattered to the floor. Its ebony sheath followed as I relinquished hold of it to grasp my offended wrist. As I struggled to suck more air into lungs already stretched to capacity, I felt tears sting my eyes like hot beads of alcohol and heard a squall of laughter from the benches.

It was as if I had been struck with a steel bar.

Which, of course, I had. Bayswater, with a skill and speed that were beyond my powers to reciprocate, had brought the flat of his rapier down across my sword-hand.

As I at last realized what had exactly happened, I expelled the musty air I had been accumulating in a long, yodelling moan that was punctuated with the foulest of imprecations.

I had always been a poor swordsman. A shame, my father had said, and what was more, an imponderable shame, given the fact that the family boasted so many ancestors either famous or infamous for their martial expertise.

My gaze darted around the chamber. I was encircled by Bayswater's grinning henchmen and toadies. I knew I could expect no mercy from them; first, they would play with me, like cats with a mouse, then dispatch me on a journey into the void, which, these hundred years or so, we have been asked to suppose is a heaven; and I wondered, as my injured hand sought refuge in my pocket and fingered the artefact that lay sequestered there, why I had until now been so merciful myself. The ruling classes of the Darkling Isle: they were all crooks, some more nakedly so than others, but crooks, thieves, murderers, whores, nonetheless. I was no different, except that straitened circumstances had, since my late teens, compelled me to act with less hypocrisy. My civil list income was supplemented not by usurious loans, embezzlement, simony and graft, but by a life of crime so artless it was almost plebeian. But whatever I and my surrounding peers had in common, and whatever our differences, mercy – or so my present situation made obvious – was not a fitting companion for those, like myself, who wished to live long and accrue their share of knowledge, women and loot.

"You should not dismiss the new science so glibly, Bayswater," I said, taking the artefact from my pocket and proffering it towards him. "It may yet prove this nation's salvation, as I averred in my speech before I was so oafishly interrupted. You should have attended more closely."

For a moment, the thought that my speech had been deliberately sabotaged irked me more than the growing suspicion that I had been set up, that, unlikely as it might seem, my drawing out was part of a conspiracy. But for a moment only. Damn the speech. The question of why Bayswater was so intent on my assassination was, of course, paramount. I was hated and feared by many, but I could not think of any one who would greatly profit by my death. And being at mortal loggerheads in the chamber: this, of course, though not being without precedent, was unusual enough to be perplexing in itself. Though member privilege might be seen to encourage it, it was remarkable that the proportion of nobles who fell victim to each other's resentments was not higher than it was. The knowledge that a bloody fit of offended pride brought swift revenge had, I daresay, much to do with it; as did the fact that one often satisfied one's pique upon thralls, something that, for a peer of the realm, did not even rank as a peccadillo. Bayswater would not risk killing me unless he had backing and the rewards were substantial. Since the nobility were for the most part impoverished, it would seem someone from London's powerful, emergent merchant class would be the most likely instigator of a plot. And as soon as that consideration struck home, my true enemy stood revealed.

My father-in-law.

I tried to filibuster. "I spent many hours crafting today's statement," I murmured, speaking largely to myself, a single name – *Peachum* – percolating into my consciousness and filling it till my skull seemed fit to crack from internal pressure.

The assembled lords and ladies looked at the artefact with bemusement. It was no more than an black, oblong box, its mother-of-pearl inlay giving it the appearance of chinoiserie. I had found it amongst the possessions of a squire's daughter whose coach I had ambushed on the Brighton to London road. At once, I had known it to be an artefact of the Ancients. It had been non-functional, of course – indeed, it had taken me some weeks to establish just what its original function was – but I had at last revived it from its millennia-long sleep.

"A snuffbox, Soho?" said the assassin. "Or do you mean to present us with a lady's paints and powders?"

"A jewellery box, but also a contrivance for a lady's self-defence," I said. "Over 4,000 years old. La! I don't need to tell you those times were almost as dangerous as our own."

I lifted the box's lid. Opened correctly, the mirror set in the lid's back would have been the first thing to greet a lady's vanity; but unfastening its clasp, as I had done, without taking the necessary precautions, the mirror, which I knew to be a portal that opened upon intelligences that lay, half awake, half asleep, in the great cities buried hundreds of miles beneath us, would do more than reflect a prospective thief's likeness.

Bayswater was the first to have an intimation of the device's nature, and the concomitant danger it presented. "Diabolism," he whispered. "You truly are the devil's spawn." And then his eyes exploded in their sockets, like eggs that I have experimented with in my chamber *mirabilis*. Using a revived artefact bought from a ped-

lar during one of my excursions into the wastes, I found that I was able to heat them to many hundreds of degrees Celsius from within.

His screams were overlaid with a hideous *pop! pop! pop!* as his cronies were similarly afflicted. Their own screams drowned out his own.

Soon, a dozen, perhaps two dozen lords and ladies were a-leaping, their hands clenched over their eyes, blood and vitreous humour oozing between their splayed fingers. Blind, they thrashed and flailed, toppled over benches and rolled upon the floor like a pack of slathering hounds. One old Dame, in her confusion, strove to attain the throne, where, tripping and stumbling in a grotesque parody of a curtsy to a queen who had yet to visit us that year, she fell and, hitting her head against the exposed marble edge of the steps, added the red of her blood to the deep red pile of the carpet.

I slammed the box shut before those still unaffected should fall victim to a fatal curiosity and themselves stare into the mirror's cruel depths.

It had been my intention to defend myself, not bring down the state.

Slipping the box back into my pocket, I scooped the blade and its ebony sheath from the floor, reintroduced them to each other, turned on my heels and

then, taking advantage of the general panic, fled the chamber. My maiden speech had not gone well. It would be some time before I could dare return to the House of Peers and again present my arguments. But return I must, I thought. The nation must embrace the new science. Surely, that was obvious to any rational man. My country's still-born renaissance was being squandered in its haste to return to an age of superstition and darkness. The shameful *status quo* had to be redressed.

I raced through the corridors of the Palace of Westminster, past the disused Commons, and on until I reached the vestibule that stood adjacent to old Westminster Hall. Exiting through an archway that had not much changed since Pugin and Barry laid the foundations of the pile that, 40 centuries on, was an eclectic ruin comprised of countless forgotten architectural styles, I exchanged the fusty shadows of governance for a bright, summer's day. Outside, my coach was waiting.

I would have to pay my father-in-law a visit.

But not today. Today was my birthday.

My confederates lifted their glasses: Jemmy Twitcher, Crook-fingered Jack, Wat Dreary, Robin of Bagshot, Nim-

ming Ned, Henry Paddington, Mat of the Mint, and Ben Budge. We sat at a table in the *Beggar's Banquet*, a noted chocolate house in Wardour Street.

"A health to your lord's majority," said Wat Dreary, in that monotonic manner of his that had earned him his moniker.

"Long life," said Crook-fingered Jack. The rest, sheep that they were, fell into line, and offered me their own toasts, each felicitation distinguished by an unimaginativeness that vied with its predecessor. My confederates were, in truth, unimaginative and despicable company. Thralls, like witches, were not true men, and were not usually suffered to live within the city walls. But I needed them. They were familiar with the wastes.

"Long life," repeated Jack, then added, "and prosperity." He gave me an unpleasant and meaningful look.

"Jack," I said. I paused, wondering how to deal with this idiot. Like his pards, he was descended from human detritus that a previous age had called the "information poor," his congenital slowness the result of drug-based pacification measures practised upon his ancestors. Those humans outside the walls were no longer "simplified,"

as the euphemism went. The anti-toxin that had found its way to the Darkling Isle from the East had restored old man Crook-finger to something approaching full mental competence. But the millennia-long wounds of simplification could not be so easily taken out of the equation of inheritance. Jack was a dull boy. "Listen," I continued, "I come today into a thousand-a-year. After I have paid off certain debts, I'll probably have just enough left over to pay for your drinks. For now, at least. Genuine prosperity will come the way it has always come: through ingenuity, valour and hard work." I looked searchingly into his face, and then into each of their faces, to try to ascertain whether I could detect any flickers of comprehension. None. Resignedly, I returned my attention to Jack. "If it weren't for me, if it weren't for my influence and my propensity to threaten and bribe, you would still be working in the chain-gang by which you first entered this city." I gave him my most threatening stare. If this ploy did not work, I thought, then I would have to resort to violence. "A little gratitude might be in order, sometimes, I think, don't you?"

"Very pleased and proud," said Jack, backing down from whatever criticisms of my leadership he might have



been about to make, “proud as punch, you might say I am, sir, to serve as your guide.”

“And your bodyguard,” added Nimming Ned who, a tad more intelligent than Jack, knew that I could send him and his friends back to the chain-gang, or even the gallows, whenever I might feel so inclined.

“Money,” I said, in a spirit of conciliation, “will come to those who help themselves to it.” I lifted my bumper of *aqua vita* to my lips, quaffed, and slammed the glass down on the table. “Gentlemen, let’s get down to business.” I could not bear to enter into what, amongst their kind, passed for celebration. I wished to impart instructions while still sober, and then leave. I would have my own little party, later, in the privacy of my own chambers. “I have had intelligence –”

“Good goblin intelligence,” interrupted Ben Budge, eager, it seemed, to ingratiate himself into my good books after witnessing my earlier impatience. “From our best contact, too.”

– that a merchant,” I continued, unabated, and flashing Budge a scowl to show him that I disdained dogs as much as I did sheep, “by the name of Underwood is on his way to London from Reading. This man has been known to trade in the things I seek –”

“Artefacts,” Budge interrupted again, undaunted, and fairly panting, so desirous was he to be tossed a scrap of my favour. “Stuff from the Netherworld.”

“Quite so,” I said, acknowledging the dog only to stop him yapping. “Relics from the ancient days.”

“No gold?” said Mat of the Mint.

“Oh yes, gold and guineas a-plenty, as well as linen, lace, plate and all the other things you so covet. It’s only artefacts that interest me, as I’m sure you know.”

“Glad to hear it, my lord,” said Mat, rubbing his hands. “Peachum will give us a good percentage, I should guess?”

“I feel we shall be having to drop Mr Peachum,” I said. “For I believe he has it in mind to drop us.”

“Give us over to the law?” “Strike us out?” “Do the filthy on us?” “Make us do the Jack Ketch rigadood?” said one and all, in tones of village-idiot outrage.

“Yes. Drop us. And stretch our necks to boot. I’m afraid it’s all down to this business between me and his daughter.”

Jemmy Twitcher, who, like most of us that afternoon, had drunk more *aqua vita* than chocolate, thumped his fist down upon the table and broke into song.

*Through all the employments of life,
Each neighbour abuses his brother;
Whore and rogue, they call husband and wife:
All professions be-rogue one another.
The priest calls the lawyer a cheat:
The lawyer be-knaves the divine:
And the statesman, because he’s so great,
Thinks his trade as honest as mine.*

“Be quiet, Jemmy,” I said, with all the restraint I could muster. I had had a trying day, and had no desire to have a subordinate cant me with his tuppenny ha’penny summation of life’s little ironies.

I gazed over Jemmy’s shoulder, my attention captured by the sight of a young woman, framed in the open door.

An aureole of golden, summer light surrounded her, as if she were a plaster saint seated upon the candlelit altar of my own private chapel. Or at least, upon the equally hypocritical altar of my expedient love. Polly Peachum, my most recent wife, who, until this morning’s business in the House, I had thought worth the sacrifice of my proud name in return for the supplement she brought to my income, walked into the *Beggar’s Banquet*.

I retrieved my swordstick from where it leaned against a table leg, got up, muttered my excuses to my men, and sauntered over to her. Taking her by the arm, I ushered her into a corner, where we might confer with a degree of privacy.

No sooner had she sat down than the tears started flowing.

“Oh Mackie, Mackie, he knows. Somehow my mother found out, and she told him.”

“I know he knows,” I said, a little irritated. “He tried to have me killed.”

She looked at me with wide, enamel-blue eyes, less comely than usual due to a certain blotchiness precipitated by her unseemly and wholly unhelpful jag of weeping. “Killed?” There was a rustle of hoop-petticoat as she leaned back in her chair and put a hand to her brow, as if she were more acquainted with the boards at Drury Lane than the sexual theatrics that went on in the surrounding streets. I was normally amused by her country girl affectations; today they served only to provoke my exasperation. I had married the loopy slut at a time of acute financial embarrassment. But I had, it seemed, merely exchanged one embarrassment for another.

“Yeah, *killed*, my little chitterling. Our marriage was supposed to be a secret, remember? But now the secret’s out, your Dad wants me dead. I came into my inheritance today. God knows, it’s not much, but old Peachum doubtless thinks you’re worth more to him as a widow than as baggage.”

“We’ll run away,” she said.

“Oh sure, we’ll run off into the wastes. If we’re real lucky, we’ll get to work under the whip, on some farm, perhaps, or quarry, along with a ragbag of thralls and converted witches. No thank you, Madam. I’ll have to straighten things out with your old man, that’s all.”

“You won’t hurt him, Mackie?”

“We’ll have a little heart-to-heart,” I said, thinking *With his heart on the end of my swordstick*. “I’ll be paying him a visit tomorrow, with my men. Tell him it’s business.” Should I let him fence for me one last time? I wondered. Good fences were hard to find. And my gang would need a good fence after tonight’s escapade. Perhaps I could profit by him, before I slit his throat. To take his money, then his life, would be sweet. And then again, perhaps I would merely use the excuse of business to gain entry to his house, and then have him summarily bludgeoned to death by the vacuous wretches who followed at my heels. “Now run along like a good little slut and find yourself some pimply soldier boy on leave, or better still, a man of my own rank, if not one so detestably impoverished. I’ll be seeing you tomorrow.”

“Not tonight? Oh promise it’ll be tonight, Mackie.

Please, oh pretty please.” She was putting on her little girl lost act. There had been a time I had been captivated by it. Contrariwise, there had been a time when such a strategy had seemed like the most calculated, most hideous form of whining, a time, when, for the sake of my sanity, I had had to resort to slapping her face. That time was coming round again.

“Tonight I have business to attend to,” I said, gripping the arms of my chair with both hands in an effort to resist the temptation to strike out. Sublimation, I found, was, in the end, the key to resolving my dilemma. As she rose I gave her a *thwack* on her behind, ostensibly to show that she could count on me. It was a vicious goosing, and went some way to exorcize the disgust with which I had come to regard her. But she took it, as I had meant her to, as a bestowal of my troth. Glancing over her shoulder, she grinned her saucy, milkmaid’s grin, knowing that, by doing so, a dimple would indent her left, candy-apple cheek, and remind me of the time it had been chief amongst the wiles by which she had ensnared me.

“I’ll be waiting, Mackie. I’m always waiting.”

“So you are,” I said. And I gave her a tired little salute as she swept out the door. I looked around. At the other end of the chocolate house the amused faces of my confederates were turned in my direction. Once again, Jemmy Twitcher began to sing.

*Man may escape from rope and gun,
Nay, some have outlived the doctor’s pill:
Who takes a woman, must be undone,
That basilisk is sure to kill.
The fly that sips treacle is lost in the sweets,
So he that tastes woman, woman, woman,
He that tastes woman, ruin meets.*

I had left the city walls far behind. Here, in the wastes, the road was little more than an earthen trail furrowed by wagon wheels. The horses that carried me and my band of brain-damaged followers through the wooded darkness were strong and fleet. We had covered much ground. But though my heart quickened to know that we drew near our rendezvous, it would freeze, in momentary terror, whenever the thought crossed my mind that without my guides I would be lost.

Though no more than a few miles outside London, the forest that grew on either side of the trail was almost impenetrable. The air was still; the canopy dead. There was no sign of life, or habitation. And yet, negotiating my way through the overarching thicket, I could sometimes believe that I had not left the city at all, for I seemed hemmed in by masonry. The trees: they did not belong to Earth-above. They were indigenous to the Netherworld, transplanted by the enemy during long centuries of war in an attempt to choke humanity out of its cities. Cultured in the Earth’s depths, they were made of living stone. They were trees of granite. Basalt and hypabyssal trees. Trees with brittle, carbonaceous leaves that didn’t rustle, but rattled, like the desiccated bones of men in gibbets swaying in a midnight storm. Florescent structures, that resembled morbid growths, protruded from

their slate-like bark, maroon, puce and mulberry – the sickly heirs of the flowers I had read once covered the English countryside, before the grafts from the Netherworld had taken hold.

As I rode, I would glance to left and right, half expecting the glint of subterranean eyes to fill the shadowy recesses that lay between the gothic tangle of branches and boughs; eyes that belonged to a people that would be almost forgotten but for the progeny they had left behind. I shook my head; but my fears could not be so easily dispelled, even though I knew the Netherworlders had long chosen to exile themselves in their underground fastnesses. I was one of those creatures they had sired upon humanity, and at such times as I passed through the darkness of these forests my blood was haunted by atavistic memories of great underground caverns and the joy of dark, sunless seas. And by eyes, the dark, reptilian eyes of my cousins. Sometimes, on these rides, I half wished the shadows *were* filled with goblins; half wished that my brothers watched, waiting for their chance to snatch me from this world and take me back to the cavernous motherland I was in terror of, but for which my blood yearned. I passed a hand across my face; blinked. It was not good to indulge in such morbid irrationality. Never, in all my journeys through the wastes, had I witnessed so much as the flit of a bat, or the swoop of an owl; neither had I seen gnats, midges or fireflies. Only the stone trees could claim life, and they jealously admitted no other. Nothing but darkness and stone everywhere, except in those little settlements blasted out of the ubiquitous forest and worked by slaves of the state, and in regions held by rebels.

For if a man were not a Londoner, what was he but a slave, a barbarian, a witch or thrall? And what had such dispossessed people to lose from taking up arms? Could we ever really expect to prevail in such circumstances, unless we enjoyed some significant military advantage? The kind I had offered, only to find myself spurned? At a crossroads I held up a hand, and my little troupe came to a halt. A cloaked rider with a cowl pulled full over his face stood in our path, waiting.

“Good evening, Melchezidek,” I said.

“Hello, Master Pike,” replied a thin voice emanating from the bundle of rags, a voice so like the wind that whistled through the stone branches, that anyone but myself might have supposed the bundle filled with rocks, and that the speaker were alive only in the inexplicable manner of the trees.

I nodded to my men to indicate that they should remain where they were. Then, lightly bringing my spurs against my steed’s flanks, went on alone to where the witch blocked our passage.

Without revealing his face, he spoke again. “The coach will pass this way in about one hour.” Though the missionaries had done a good job of teaching him English, they had failed to eradicate his accent, an exotic oddity in a world where not only most languages were extinct, but most dialects, too. Beneath the familiar words and grammar, I seemed to hear the sounds of the Netherworld, just as I had previously sensed its presence amongst the trees.

He pulled back his cowl. Melchezidek was always reluctant to reveal himself fully, even to me, who had known him since childhood, when I had accompanied my father on archaeological digs under the shadows of the city walls. He was a half-breed. And if I had looked as he did I might have been equally reluctant about showing my face. My father had been a half-breed, too, of course, but the familial tie had, for me, softened his terrible demeanour, as the trappings of civilization had perhaps softened it for others. Melchezidek had had no such advantages. His face was as stony as the surrounding trees, so lined and pitted that it seemed almost squamous. His hair was white, and hung to his shoulders, reflecting the moonlight with an albedo that was comparable to that of mother-of-pearl, or vitreous silica. And two small, curved horns protruded from his forehead. I had never seen a true Netherworlder, those creatures we commonly called goblins, orcs or teratoids. But if Melchezidek represented a *dilution* of their blood, I had often thought that I would not care to see one, no matter how curious I sometimes grew about my own damned ancestry, and no matter how much I recalled my father's admonishments when I had been a boy. He had told me that though my mother was human, I was not to disparage those other beings, one of whom belonged to my distaff side. For his own mother, he said, had been as beautiful as his wife.

I had not realized that the witch had been studying my own face as intently as I had his. "You're not looking well, Master Pike. Has coming into your inheritance had so little effect on you? I had hoped it might reverse the decline I have witnessed of late. Your father would not have liked to see you like this, the last of the line so dejected, and dealing out the family's patronage" – he tweaked an eyebrow towards my men – "so ignominiously."

"You've become quite the prating evangelist, Melchezidek."

"You know my opinion of Christians," he said. "I am a freed thrall, but the wars have made me a refugee for over 30 years. And the only place I have found peace is beneath London's walls. It is wise, in such circumstances, to come to some accommodation with the powers that be. You too, Master Pike, have made your accommodations, I suspect."

Briefly, I glimpsed backwards, to see that we were not in danger of being overheard. When I faced him again I let the disgust that had seized and distorted my face on having gazed upon those I "accommodated" remain. For a moment, I thought I gazed into a mirror.

"I suppose we all do," I said, with a shrug. "I have this new name they've given me. Mackie. Or Macheath. Seems it's to do with some kind of Soho fairy tale. I've been adopted, in other words."

The old witch leaned forward in his saddle.

"Fairy tales, legends, myths. They are abroad in the land. Dark tales from the darker depths of the heart. The world is caught in cycles, Master Pike. Mythic cycles. Formerly, it was that which we called the *perverse* that captivated our imaginations and lives. But the perverse lies buried underground, and will not emerge again in our lifetimes, nor those of our children and grandchildren. We are caught up in a new cycle now, the myth of

this new, resurrected church that so plagues us, and which resists all our efforts to revive the learning of the Ancients, something that has been so long your dream, Master Pike, just as it was your father's."

"And your dream too, old man. Are you disappointed?"

"Yes, but not yet in despair, Master Pike. Or else I would not be out here in the middle of the night, risking my life. The struggle must go on, and without artefacts to experiment with, that struggle is still-born. I only worry that *you* despair. These people you mix with. And these bigamous marriages I have heard of –"

"Expediency," I said. "It's hard for a witch to live in the wastes. I know that. But inside the city, life is difficult for our kind, too."

"Witch? You do not qualify. Only one-eighth of your blood is that of an orc. You have rights, you are a citizen."

"Rights? I have the right, like all our kind, to be insulted and passed over. That is why I am here, with a pistol in my belt, resorting to the tricks of a common highwayman. I do not pretend to understand the full extent of your hardships, Melchezidek, please do not presume to offer me advice."

"*Mackie!*" came a sharp whisper, cutting through the night's stillness. "*Mackie, I can hear a coach approaching.*" I cast a glance behind me. Ned was on his hands and knees, backside in the air and right ear flush to the ground.

"They're early," said the witch.

"It doesn't matter," I said, a hand pulling the flintlock free. I had often considered bringing one of my militarily-adapted artefacts along on one of these nocturnal capers. But the contents of my chamber *mirabilis* were too unpredictable, too ungovernable. I wanted to hold up a coach, not initiate a cataclysm. "I'm ready."

"I will leave you to go about your business, Master Pike," he said. "Or should I say Macheath?" He grinned, the moonlight reflecting off his serrated teeth, and playing in his silvery-white hair. "But think on this: if the world is caught in mythic cycles, then so are some families, too. In such circumstances, a man may lose his soul. Make your own story, Master Pike. This business with artefacts: it has been necessary, I suppose. But I have begun to suspect that our experimenting is taking us along a path that may ultimately prove sterile. The world, perhaps, should make its own story, just as we should. We should not look so to the past."

He turned his horse around and disappeared into the darkness, as quietly as if his steed had been shod with cotton wool, a ghost, a figure cut loose from the narrative that had given the world my teratoid forebears, that old, calamitous narrative imposed upon us by strange gods, a narrative that had drowned out the song of who we were, where we had come from and where we might yet go, in its strident fanfare of dark lusts, derangement and hysterical amnesia.

Our enterprise went successfully. I let my men do the dirtiest of the work. And I let them take their share of the dirtiest of the pickings: snuffboxes, fine linen, a few swords, timepieces, silver candlesticks and a lady's mantle. I took, I must admit, a little dirty lucre myself: a

purse of crowns. But, as usual, I reserved the main thrust of my cupidity for things antiquarian: a handful of curios, and, most interestingly, the decapitated head of a mannequin used to display wigs which, I suspected, had originally belonged to one of those mechanical men that the ancient world had used as thralls.

I would get back to London, I calculated, before midnight. First thing tomorrow, I would see Peachum. But I set my sights now on the little birthday celebration that I had been promising myself all day.

That purse of crowns was going to be put to good use.

“The ladies are here, sir,” said Filch, my valet.

In they came, some as far as from Hockley-in-the-Hole, Vinegar Yard and Lewkner’s Lane, but most from the environs over which I was the titular head, good Soho lasses all, many of whom had entertained me on previous occasions: Mistress Coaxer, Dolly Trull, Mistress Vixen, Betty Doxy, Jenny Diver, Mistress Slammekin, Sukey Tawdry, and Molly Brazen.

Discrete as ever, Filch withdrew, if with the hint of a prurient leer on his tightly-compressed lips.

“Dear Mistress Coaxer,” I said, helping the slut off with her light wrap, “how charming you look so bedizened with your paste and painted with your most vicious rouges.” I felt a forefinger and thumb squeeze my left buttock, as if I had sat down upon the muddy banks of the Thames and had had a crab disabuse me of the notion that I could do so with impunity. “And Dolly Trull! As amorous as ever, eh?” Speaking of crabs, I thought to leave Dolly to last. The last time I had sampled her I had done so without the degree of impunity a man might wish. “You’re always so taken with stealing hearts that you don’t allow yourself time to steal anything else. Shame on you!” I glanced from one face to another, going through my selection like a greedy child eager to sample his comfits without further delay, but spoilt for choice. “Mistress Vixen, I’m yours! And Betty Doxy – come here, girl! Do you drink as hard as ever? And Jenny Diver, too. Never did a whore have such a sanctified look and such a mischievous heart. Mistress Slammekin, Sukey Tawdry and Molly Brazen – free-hearted floozies all, each with the ogle of a rattlesnake. Before you seat yourselves, ladies, please – a dance I insist!”

I turned to the musicians I had hired and cued them. They set to with enthusiasm, too much enthusiasm, in fact, sawing at their strings as if determined to use up the city’s supply of catgut in that one evening. I had promised to pay them in flesh, as well as in guineas, and the sight of the itinerant ladies had undoubtedly stoked their lust, so that they were eager to be remunerated as soon as possible. I stamped my foot on the boards and the quintet, looking a little abashed, fell back from a *prestissimo* to an *andante*.

I had drawn up the programme some weeks ago. I owned, amongst my collection of ancient manuscripts, a book of antique airs, ballads and chamber music. The scores were all damaged, and it had amused me to add my own interpretations where notes and sometimes, whole staves, were missing. The piece I had selected to

introduce the proceedings had been entitled *Surabaya Johnny*. In the programme notes – I had written them purely for my own pleasure, the tavern musicians I employed caring as little for such refinements as my illiterate whores – I had dedicated it to the memory of my grandfather, the only real hero of my family, who had spent much of his life in the Far East, and may, for all I knew, have visited that mysterious Javanese city with his beloved goblin woman, Gala.

“Sukey,” I said, “may I have the honour?”

“No, but you may *take* it, my lord, as befits your station.” She smiled and displayed two imperfect rows of tobacco-stained teeth. “Though I fear,” she concluded, with a hoarse giggle, “that a girl like me’s got little enough honour left in ’er for you to avail yourself of.”

Her blood, like mine, had been infused with the alien, though hers was a cocktail that was one-hundred percent *homo sap*. (Not that the nomenclature of the Ancients had much meaning any more, at least, not when applied to the genus we stubbornly called “human.”) Her mother, I would have guessed, had at some time slept with a sailor from Cathay. It seemed appropriate that the issue of that cynical union accompany me to that sad, languid *Surabaya* conjured up by the music that filled the room.

I pulled her into the middle of the floor. Filch, with the assistance of a few street boys he had pressed into service, had removed the furniture earlier, and save for the podium that accommodated the string quintet, the long, panelled dining room was bare. Sukey pressed her head against my chest. I put an arm around her and we shuffled across the boards, her skirts sending up a frou-frou that was so wonderfully venereal that I almost convinced myself that it might signify that she desired my person as much as my purse. I looked good tonight, in black velvet breeches and white silk hose, my silver-buckled shoes shining in the lamplight. My waistcoat was embroidered so finely that it had doubtless cost the eyesight of a few, poor, little thrall seamstresses, and my cravat was starched and magnificently frothy. But it would take more than an attack of the hots to make Sukey Tawdry forget the imperatives of her trade. In her the venereal and the venal were perfectly counterpoised.

I looked over Sukey’s head. Her sisters-in-whoredom leaned against the walls, bored, but brave, as if ranged before a firing squad personifying “unspeakable tedium” that their profession required them to outface. They gazed at me coyly from behind the spread lunettes of their fans, their eyes evincing an appropriately hot, if staged, longing. They would get their turn, I told myself, even if there were no male guests to leaven the task that I had set myself (the musicians would have to wait until I was through); they would get their turn even if it killed me.

As my father used to say: “*I love the sex; and a man who loves money might as well be contented with one guinea, as with one woman. I must have women. If it were not for unprincipled bucks like me, Drury Lane would be uninhabited.*” I had, if not my father’s skill with a blade – as I think today’s business in the chamber proved – then at least his propensity for unwearied swordplay with the women, and most particularly, women such as these. Per-

haps such swordsmanship might have allayed his disappointment in my lack of martial skills. If so, I hoped his ghost looked on.

"I usually prefer the *old* 'uns," she said, as I studied her impressive cleavage, breasts forced into their unpromising attitude by the long, tightly-laced corset that she wore over her crimson, silk mantua. "Cos I always makes 'em pay for what they can't do. But young bucks like you, my lord, are just too much of a temptation. Tell me: can I call you Mackie?"

"Yes," I sighed, the sudden mention of that name more exhausting, more disturbing, than the sum of the day's events. "Everybody else does. So why not?" I pulled back my lips and showed off my rows of spiked enamel; she giggled, the trilling notes as little girlish and as manipulative as my pretty Poll. "I thought once I might have amounted to something," I continued. "Become a player in the 'new age' I convinced myself was waiting around the corner. But I'm not a Pike. I'm a criminal, no different from others of my class, except that my crimes are somewhat less obfuscated by hypocrisy. So why shouldn't you call me Macheath?"

"Oh, you *do* know how to talk."

Perhaps I did. But sensing that the pleasures of intelligent conversation were, tonight, not to be had, I kept my peace, and danced her through the doors. Outside, in the hallway, I loosened my grip of her waist and offered her my hand. She took it, in ironic imitation of a lady of quality. I took it, the irony no less rich, in imitation of a lord. I often think there's such a similitude of manners in high and low life, that it is difficult to determine whether (in the fashionable vices) the fine gentlemen imitate the highwaymen, or the highwaymen the fine gentlemen. I certainly was no longer clear about where the role ended and reality began.

"To the roof garden, I think," I said. I lead her past the iron-braced doors behind which lay my chamber *mirabilis*, its stock of artefacts now including a lady's device for self-defence that had been strenuously combat-proven. We proceeded through the arch that lay at the end of the corridor and up the staircase that wound towards the top of the house's bell-tower. "A warm summer night awaits our fornication."

As we ascended, we passed various family portraits, glowering down at us through the yellow light cast by the great, crystal chandelier that hung like a plummet from the stairwell's uppermost shadows. Under the gaze of so many other accursed Pikes, my legs grew heavy, my breathing laboured, my youthful vitality sapped by the grim weight of my ancestral past.

"Ohhh, Mackie, that one looks scary," she said. I believed very little was capable of frightening Sukey Tawdry, but the little attack of the shudders that she affected gave her an excuse to throw her arms about me. The avaricious gesture had me suspect that she believed that the anxieties I suffered whenever I passed beneath these family likenesses – and which, I supposed, had manifested themselves in my face – threatened to spike my appetite, and that she might stand to be cheated of her fee. Her sup-

position was wrong, but not by much. There was something about those portraits which I had always found intensely disturbing.

"That's my father," I said, trying to ignore the dread that swirled in the pit of my stomach. I put a hand into my breech's pocket and jingled some loose change so that my squeeze might be as reassured by the sound of ready money, as by the calm, cool timbre of my voice. If I was somewhat enervated by all that I had crowded into the last 24 hours, and bowed by the recollections of my history that these portraits summoned up, then I was still determined to make good on my investment and make a night of it, even if the night would soon be subsumed by the dawn. "My father, the antecedent Lord Soho. Painted, here, in the uniform of the Order of Black Knights, of which I too am a member, if something of a nominal one. The portrait was executed shortly after he was ennobled, when he moved from Greenwich to this, his sinecure. A parvenu, his enemies said. Bought the title after making a fortune importing goods from the East, a fortune which, in his last years, he lost, largely due to the envy and chicanery of the Darkling Isle's real aristocrats, the Batterseas, Kensingtons and their ilk. Died when I was still a boy and left me his name, title and debts. Very good of him, I'm sure."

I pointed to the portrait that hung next to my father's. "And that there's my paternal grandfather, Richard Pike the First. Perhaps you've heard of him? A famous soldier, if somewhat indiscreet in his amours. Entered into a liaison with a goblin girl. Died in exile."

"You don't look much like him, Mackie."

"Of course not," I snapped. "He was fully human. Not –" Involuntarily, I put a hand to my face; ran it over the pocks and rills that had been transmitted to me through my family's polluted bloodline, flesh that, though not as squamous as a goblin's, was non-human enough to mark me out as one of the enemy. No matter that my father had not only acquired citizenship, but had bought his way into the establishment, I would always be an outsider. "He had three sons and two daughters," I continued, taking my hand away from my face as soon as I became conscious of it there. "Only one son returned to the Darkling Isle. I am ignorant of what became of the others."

"They *let* him return? said Sukey, somewhat incredulously.

"It was before the blood laws were enacted," I explained.

"They certainly wouldn't accept him now. You have to have an eighth, or, preferably –"

"Less than an eighth," said Sukey, like a schoolgirl reciting from a primer on civic responsibility, "preferably less than an eighth of teratoid blood in you to qualify for citizenship."

"Quite so." I averted my face so that she might not see my sneer.

As we ascended past the portraits of my immediate forebears, my little, gaily-wrapped, 96-pound parcel of bought flesh stopped, looked up at me and put a hand to my cheek, exploring its trammelled skin with a long, red fingernail. "You look nice, Mackie," she said with a tenderness I had not suspected her capable of, and which I

found unaccountably moving. "I mean, with your grey complexion and all. It's nice. It's nothing to be ashamed of. Don't let anybody tell you different."

We reached the summit. I led her forward into the little roof garden. Still somewhat distracted by my encounter with my ancestors, and touched by Sukey's curious display of empathy, I disengaged my arm from hers and walked straightaway to the parapets. I wanted to be alone. Glancing around, I saw that my companion idled, going down on one knee to smell various horticultural marvels that had been plucked from the countryside before the stone forests of the Netherworld had overrun the land.

A series of trellises formed an arbour at the garden's centre, above which the cross of St George flapped atop a long, steel flagpole, listless as a dying bird. Beneath the flag, on bended knee as she was, she seemed to be making obeisance to the nation's forgotten gods, or, perhaps, more in keeping with her character, was mocking that symbol of our heritage, just as she mocked me, perhaps, by pretending to love the goblin within the man, and by deeming it appropriate to await my pleasure in that florescent bower, with its hackneyed associations of romance and lovers' bliss.

Fortified by this surge of cynicism, I placed my hands on the parapet and looked down upon Soho Square.

My own house was the largest of the several imposing edifices that formed the square's perimeter. The dimensions of the big, gloomy pile were a burden, and I would have readily exchanged them for the unknown, mysterious, but infinitely more wonderful dimensions of wealth. But these old buildings were impossible to sell. And I had only its draughts and shadows to comfort me. I had my valet, it's true, but I had retained his service only by the strictest of economies, a financial regimen that had involved relinquishing much of the house to bed-sheets, cobwebs, woodworm, and the general despoliation of hopeless decay. A few private rooms, my chamber *mirabilis*, and the chapel dedicated to the old gods that I had had reconsecrated to the new in order to

appease the city's burghers and demonstrate that I was not of the devil's party, but a man of God – these apartments alone remained for my use. The rest of the house was like a sealed tomb.

I looked up, squinted, and focused on a section of skyline beyond the square: the fashionable new buildings along Oxford Street whose gigantic proportions relegated my own Soho quarters to the status of a foothill. Like all buildings thrown up by the massive rebuilding projects that had followed the peace between Earth-below and Earth-above, their parabolic arches, absurdly extended

finials, ornate stonework, and mosaics made from shards of porcelain and glazed earthenware, brought to mind the ancient

Catalonian structures attributed to Gaudí. Carved from the

imported, living stone of the wastes, their

façades were angry, eruptive, where the

husbanded rock had been slaughtered

after it had met the requirements

of the city's engineers and masons. Each

assemblage of steeple, tower,

pinnacle and spire stared

back at me like some troll who

had awoken from a distant

age, only to be frozen in stony horror

at the spectacle of the modern world.

The buildings were terrible, more terrible than the

trees that they had been hewn from, with a terror that flowed from

their deadness, where it had once flowed from life. It was our death they housed, our mortality they celebrated. Our final despair.

"We are in danger of entering another dark age," I muttered. "Who could have believed it?" I was suffering from my own personal dark age, of course. On the low horizon of my flattened life, the possibility of what those damned Christians called "redemption" would sometimes present itself. *I might still, I would think, be able to slough off who I am, or rather, who I have come to be. I may yet become a different person.* But I was trapped. Trapped by my own weakness. How might I find the strength to free myself when the world was trapped within its own similarly false identity, the bars and walls of its manifold pseudodoxies and lies? "A hundred years ago," I continued, "it seemed that we would enjoy a new



renascence of learning, but the energy of these damnable *Christians* has undone so much. We are falling back into ignorance.” On a clear summer’s night such as this I could see, if not the city walls themselves – the snaking, circumambient mass of stone, mortar, *chevaux-de-frise*, and cannon that protected us – then the lights, the thin, lantern-dotted line that indicated the city limits.

“Atlantis is in ruins,” I said, continuing my self-scarifying monologue. “Coptic armies have ravaged Afric like swarms of locusts.” I put a hand between the loosened folds of my cambric shirt, found the lanyard, and then, fingers slipping down its length, settled my hand around the key which unlocked my chamber *mirabilis*. It was a comfort to know that it was there; like the city walls, it was a bulwark against barbarism, even if it could do little to protect me from my civilization’s inner demons. “It’s this accursed *True Word* that these *Christians* claim to have discovered in the East. The one intact copy of their wretched *Holy Bible*. Ha. It’s an artefact, of course, that *Bible*, just like those I’ve set such store by over the years. How can something from the ancient world contribute to our destruction, rather than our enlightenment? Does history have as cruel a sense of humour as this damned *Christian God*?”

I felt Sukey’s sweat-streaked breasts against my back, wet and warm as big, soapy sponges. She pressed herself closer, and the heat intensified. I shifted, restless.

“Hold me, Mackie. Don’t let the barbarians get me. A girl needs someone to look out for her these days. So many bad things are loose in the wastes. Save me from them, Mackie. Save poor little Sukey.” Swinging around, I took her by the arms and bent her over a merlon. Her head pointed towards the cobbles some 200 feet below, her hindquarters, offered up by the bevelled stone that supported her waist, providing sufficient inducement to snap me out of my miserable reverie and attend to the *raison d’être* of our little rooftop one-on-one.

She gave a squeal. I think it was genuine; the capstone that dug into her belly must have been quite sharp. Then her innate and admirable professionalism took over, and the sound effects that followed – while conceding that there was to be little foreplay – were stage-managed with the expertise of one used to satisfying the demands of rapscallions, rakehells and the occasional mad aristocrat.

I kicked at her ankles, first one, and then the other, sweeping her legs to either side of the merlon, so that her thighs hugged its respective embrasures. For a while, I studied the tendered rump. Then I fell to pulling up her petticoats, eager to bring the affair to conclusion and rejoin my other guests, each one of whom, I had promised myself, would serve or be serviced in a different part of my rambling mansion.

For a while, I was frustrated by her underskirts’ sheer voluminousness, until, tearing at them like a wild dog, I fell to, sending a cry out over London’s rooftops which was a celebration of my goblinry and a release of 21 years of pent-up sorrows and hatreds.

There is a traditional way in which a lord and a commoner achieve congress. It involves what is known as the “minimalist embrace,” what contact there is being confined to the genital area. And so we continued, I with hands

locked behind my head, eyes raised to the moon, and bay-ing like a feral animal, while she wiggled and waggled in that exemplary way of hers, making little moans, gasps and other appropriate noises, and occasionally offering a comment on my virility, skill, omnipotence and general *savoir faire* by way of elegant variation. At last, if not to mutual satisfaction, then, perhaps, to both parties’ relief, the goal of our carnality was achieved in a pleasurable if unremarkable evacuation.

It was only then that I became aware that I was being watched.

I turned, hands automatically occupying themselves in the discreet adjustment of my breeches. Peachum, flanked by a posse of constabulary, was pointing an accusing finger at me and indulging in a stupid, lop-sided, but horribly triumphant grin.

Wobbling a little, Sukey got to her feet, crossed the roof garden and stood by his side, patting down her skirts and glancing backwards with eyes that were lit with the same malicious glee that animated the face of my father-in-law.

“You are an adulterer, sir, as well as being a notorious bigamist,” he said.

“I’m a lord of the realm, sir,” I countered, surprise giving way to indignation, “and I am not to be held accountable for such trifles.”

“And what you did in the chamber today, sir, was that such a trifle?”

“Indeed no, sir, but member privilege does not make me accountable to you.”

“You are free with your member privilege, sir. Almost as free as you are with your member.”

Sukey essayed a laugh, but sensing that a whore might not indulge her humour, here, without incurring some painful recompense, she hurriedly accepted the purse which Peachum extended to her and scurried down the stairs.

“I told you I liked the *old ’uns*,” she said, by way of a parting shot, “Mr Mackie Messer, *sir*.”

Peachum drew himself up. “Yes, you are free, sir. Too free. We shall have to rectify *that*. You have injured my daughter.”

“Her reputation will survive its association with my name, Peachum. It has, after all, survived its association with yours. Her position as one of Soho’s most prominent strumpets will not, I think, be compromised by a few street urchins calling out ‘*Lady Poll!*’ after her. It is not *I* who am accountable to you, but you to me, sir. Yesterday morning you made an attempt on my life. Do you deny it?”

“Arrest him,” said Peachum, quietly, to the constables.

I smirked. But on seeing the constables advance, the smirk withered on my lips.

“There is some mistake,” I said. “I am Lord Soho. I may only be judged by my peers.”

“And they *have* judged you,” said Peachum. “But you have perhaps been so busy as not to be aware that the House was in special sitting tonight. A bill has been passed revoking all previous legislation that made it possible for you and others of your filthy kind to reside behind the city walls. It is not only half-breeds who are now to be denied citizenship, Macheath. It is quadrons, and, yes,

ocorroons too. Your citizenship is revoked. You are no longer a lord. And as such – ”

One of the constables interrupted him, eager to secure the last lot of doom-laden words for himself, and to squander them in my suddenly dispossessed presence. “As such you are accused of murder, kidnapping, wounding, grievous bodily harm, actual bodily harm, petty larceny, grand larceny, compound larceny, fraud, bigamy, living off immoral earnings and procurement. And oh yes,” he added, his laughter bright where mine had dulled, “you are also accused of being an illegal alien.”

It was thus I came to Newgate.

*What gudgeons are we men!
Every woman's easy prey.
Though we have felt the hook, again
We bite, and they betray.*

*The bird that has been trapped,
When he hears his calling mate,
To her he flies, again he's clipped
Within his wiry grate.*

If there were ever to be written a comprehensive anatomy of bleakness, or a world encyclopaedia of misery, I would, I believe, make an excellent contributor. A mere paragraph or two focusing on the twelve all-too-bleak, all-too-miserable hours spent in the dark, labyrinthine depths of Her Majesty's prison, would elevate any account of my life's travails to a level that would necessarily resound down the years.

The intensity of my ordeal was due largely to my visitors: Polly Peachum and, as misfortune would have it, Lucy Lockit, the gaoler's daughter. Indeed, the conjunction, which until now had been unheralded, was worse than that of certain, unlucky stars. A year or two ago, I had not only flirted with Lucy in order to stock up credit in the event of future arrest, but had upped the ante of this “get out of gaol free” *affaire de coeur* by marrying the silly girl.

My two wives stood outside my cell regarding each other evilly. Each held a small lamp close to her face, and their heavily-painted eyes glinted, yellow and phantasmal.

It was necessary, of course, to disown Polly. Only by so doing might Lucy come to my aid. I must admit I would have gladly disowned Polly even if my life hadn't depended upon it. She was, I told myself, with an attention to reason somewhat skewed by the previous evening's misadventures, the one who had brought me to this pass, indeed, the source of all my recent troubles. Lord Soho, by virtue of his vast resources of self-pity, was absolved of blame.

“Be pacified, Lucy,” I said. “Polly's not my wife. She's just desperate to be thought my widow.”

“You have the heart,” said my pretty Poll, “to persist in this?”

“And have you the heart to persist in persuading me that I'm married to you? You're a very aggravating child, Polly.”

“You expose yourself, Mistress Peachum,” said Lucy. “Besides, it's barbarous in you to worry a gentleman in his

circumstances. Decency might teach you to behave with some reserve with the husband while his wife is present.”

“Seriously, Polly,” I said, “this is carrying a joke too far.”

“My father's the turnkey here, Mistress Peachum. If you are determined to raise a disturbance I shall be obliged to ask him to show you the door.” And after he's done that, I thought, you can persuade him, with a daughter's sweet, wheedling words, or, if it be more persuasive, the promise of incest, to show *me* the door. “I'm sorry, Madam, you force me to be ill-bred,” concluded my little fail-safe.

I would, I believe, have successfully prosecuted matters and earned, by my brave gainsaying, an eventual salvation, if, at that moment, the fruits of several years of fervent philandering had not caught up with me.

One of the prison guards materialized from the shadows that curtained off the rest of the corridor, long, so long it had taken 15 minutes to walk to my cell, but so obscured by darkness that I knew it to be populated only by the sighs and screams that would sometimes drift through the damp, fetid air.

“Four women more, Pike,” he said, laughing, “with a child apiece. See, here they come!”

I looked away and spat on the floor. “Tell the hangman I am ready,” I said.

And there it should have ended. But a tale is vulgarly served by poetic justice; especially, I would like to add, when that tale is my own. That I survived my life as a serial bigamist and all-round cad was due, quite astonishingly, to the fact that I chose to survive it; that I chose to go against the poetic grain. A person is shaped, they say, by environment. But that's nonsense, deterministic nonsense. Studying the Ancients, I had known that a man's character owed as much, perhaps more, to heredity. That is, to those mysterious entities called genes. I have since decided that this too is a gross simplification. Perhaps even an error. A man, I believe, is shaped by his ability to choose, to exercise his will and imagination. It is only thus that he truly defines himself.

What occurred to me on the road to Tyburn prefigured a later revelation that would bring an end to Macheath as effectively as the gallows: the revelation that I was free to remake myself in my own image.

Yet as well as choosing, I felt, that day, that I was chosen, too – chosen by a *deus ex machina* that entered this world somewhat like that fabulous “grace” that Christians like to cant about. A *deus* from another universe...

The cart rolled up Holborn, past Lincoln's Inn Fields, through St Giles and into Oxford Street. It was there, as I passed the outlying streets of my own stalking ground of Soho, that the pavements became filled with pretty maids, each one of whom made an ostentatious display of dabbling at her eyes. Women are partial to the brave, they say, and think every man handsome who is going to the gallows.

*The youth in his cart hath the air of a lord,
And we cry, There dies an Adonis!*

My jaw was set, it's true, but the emotional adhesive that bonded it emanated from a disposition to get the thing

done and escape this life rather than courage.

There were, amongst the fair sex, of course, those who were not so impressed by my comportment. Polly, Lucy and a dozen or so other women, some of whom I had married, and some of whom had received matrimonial overtures, took considerable delight in bombarding me with eggs and rotten fruit, and this brave Adonis soon looked like a fairground Aunt Sally. My ears were also subject to filth, the hurled imprecations of a mob raised on tales of goblins, “*Devil*,” “*Archfiend*” and “*Mephistopheles*,” being the least objectionable, if enjoying a pertinence, that, thanks to my countrymen’s new-found sanctity, made them all the more vindictive.

We rattled along towards Edgware Road, on whose corner the Tyburn gallows cast its shadow over the cobblestones, as it presently would over my life.

I looked up into the clear, blue sky. It seemed ready to receive me. I had never believed in much; in that respect, I was of the old religion, and my chapel still contained, suitably hidden away, the little clay images that celebrated the trinity that was the Null, the Zero and the Void. But I *had* believed in the possibility that humans might once again slough off ignorance and fear and invest themselves with the glories of the past. I had believed that the world might not have a lid, and that the azure empyrean might be limitless. That possibility seemed lost now, the sky blanked out by the dark, overarching buildings, murdered remains of the accursed present cramping all existence, just as the halter would soon cramp the tiny portion that had been allotted to Richard Pike the Third, second lord of Soho.

A coach-and-four swung out of a side street and pulled up to the cart. Throughout my progress, other vehicles had held back, allowing us swift passage. But the coach seemed intent on defying the commonly accepted etiquette awarded a condemned man. The din of the raucous crowd subsided a little as heads turned to see what its arrival portended. I had achieved such a state of detachment that it took me a while to notice that my coat of arms – a sphinx, couchant, above crossed rapiers – was displayed on the coach’s side. Dazed by this apparition, I hazarded that my old, faithful conveyance had been leased out as a funeral hearse to defray the expenses of my inhumation. I turned my attention to the figure on the driving-box. He was shrouded in a cloak that was as black as the coach’s panelling. A cowl was pulled down over his head. This was no hearse, it dawned on me. It was a getaway vehicle. For I knew that bag of bones – would have known it anywhere – whether it were perched on a driving-box or bestride a black mare in the drear, stony forests of the wastes.

“Melchezidek,” I said, my voice breaking, “Melchezidek, is that you?”

“Prepare yourself, Master Pike,” he replied.

A flap of his cloak fell open; through it, a bony, long-fingered hand appeared, clutching that dear implement of perambulatory refinement and cruelty, my swordstick. The old witch flexed his arm; threw. The swordstick described cartwheels, its silver knob flashing as it caught the rays of the noonday sun. How beautiful it looked, that dandyish length of ebon and steel that had captivated the eyes

of the ladies and whose concealed blade had despatched more than a few impudent thralls. I half stood, and, though manacled, endeavoured to raise my hands to snatch it from the air before the guards seated to either side of me could intervene.

Everything had suddenly seemed so right, so fated, that when I plucked the swordstick from the air, I knew, with a surge of gladness in my heart, that *possibility* still existed. Above me, the sky seemed to open up. Sunlight streamed through the matted vault of the overhanging buildings and was everywhere. I placed the black shaft between my knees and then, with both hands clasping the stick’s hilt, twisted and pulled, releasing the blade from its oiled confines.

What I did next was largely due to the insight that, on grasping the short, thin sword, suddenly irradiated my brain, like an exploding cannonball filled with magnesium.

I’m not Macheath, I said to myself. *I’ve never been Macheath. That was a name given me by my Soho confederates. I’m Richard Pike. I’m Richard Pike the Third. And I’m also something marvellously other...*

A searing consciousness of my patrimony burned through my veins. From the depths of those hot, salty streams and rivulets, I heard the voices of my father and grandfather, and deeper down, the voices of orcs. But from the deepest abyss of my being came a terrible, alien voice that pre-dated not only my family, but the Earth itself, and the universe that it was a part of. And it was that unspeakable presence that guided my hand.

I screamed, then jabbed the blade under the ribs of the guard to my right, who was in the process of rising to disarm me; too casually, too confidently by far, it transpired, to save his wife the expense of widow’s weeds. I hobbled forward, the ankle chains clanking on the straw-covered boards, the cart’s driver glancing around but failing to appreciate the peril of his situation. Within the time it took me to make three swift hops, I skewered him through the left eye.

I spun about, killing the remaining guard with a slash that carved a neat, conic section out of his oesophagus. I screamed again, as I was spattered with his blood.

The coach was now almost flush against the cart’s big, right wheel. If I had not been shackled I believe I might have leaned out, opened its door, mounted the cart’s side, and leapt into its velvety interior. But constrained as I was, I knew that simple act of athleticism to be impossible; I stood transfixed, staring at the coat of arms that decorated the varnished, black wood, its propinquity eliciting a low, rising growl of frustration. The cart’s horse had bolted, and both vehicles thundered along Oxford street in tandem. Cane stuck between my thighs, knees bent, and hands held before me, grasping my blood-slicked blade, I began to sway and stumble. Soon, it was all that I could do to prevent myself from being pitched onto my face.

The voices within me became louder, drowning out the shouts of the mob, some of whom had flung themselves at the cart, obtained purchase, and hung suspended from the sides and chassis. I feared they would at any minute induce it to topple, or else clamber aboard, tearing me to pieces in their desire not to be cheated out of a hanging. As I watched

mouths open and close in silence, the coarse plebeian utterances of these zealots swamped by the clamour inside my skull, I at last began to attend to what my voices said. They didn't communicate in English, or, it seemed, in any human tongue, and the sub-verbal transaction was almost instantaneous. But in that second of communion with forces personal, yet supremely alien, I knew, for the first time in my life, who and what I was, and what I was to do.

I focused on my wrists, jerking at the chain that restrained them. The links snapped. Tucking the blade under one arm, I bent down, grasped the restraint that fettered my ankles and, with one fluid motion that brought me back to a standing position, freed myself. I waited for the surprise that should, by any reasonable expectation, have been forthcoming. But there was none. Surprise would come later, reserved, not so much for the discovery that the highwayman, Macheath, had never really existed, but for a deeper truth: that the scientist I had thought was my better, nobler self, was equally unreal. The Ancients, with their claims to possess objective knowledge of the world, and, indeed, foolish as it seemed to me now, all worlds, were as much victims of superstition as our latter-day Christians. They both belonged to a distant past that remained best forgotten. From that moment, I knew I would hunger for a different reality.

One of the mob had managed to pull himself up over the side of the cart and fell, in a sprawl of outsized limbs, amongst the straw. Tottering, I assumed my fighting stance, weight supported by my right leg, the blade held snug against my hip. In my other hand I held the ebony sheath before me, to turn or block a blow.

Swiftly, the intruder got to his feet, bunched his meaty fingers, and, finding his balance, came forward. I used the cane to knock one of his arms aside, and then kicked upwards, the toe of my left boot connecting with the soft, fleshy underside of his chin. He stepped backwards, choking. I followed – he was a big brute, and wasn't going to go down easily – right foot stepping over my left as I put all my weight behind the blade and thrust its needle-like tip into his sternum.

I pulled the blade free. He fell, dead, I think, before he hit the boards.

Quickly, I scanned the street, the coach, the sky, the cart. Those that still clung to the cart had grown tentative enough, I decided, for me to reach out and open the coach's door. I did so, and, after putting a foot on the cart's side to gain leverage, flung myself across the intervening space. The blurred cobbles rose to meet me and dash out my brains, or else confine my bones to iron-rimmed wheels, or the hooves of the team-of-four. But I impacted on wood. Feeling the embrace of velvet, and smelling old leather and fresh varnish, I knew that I had attained my goal. I scrambled to lock the door. An afterthought, in which the ugly faces of my persecutors largely figured, also stirred me to pull down the blind. I heard a snap of reins against horseflesh, and we began to accelerate, swerving through the crowds, sometimes successfully, sometimes, to go by the odd holler of outraged flesh that stung my ears, not so successfully, the gallows' party soon reduced to a diminuendo of disappointed bloodlust.

I rejoiced in their pain.

"You've learnt much today, Master Pike," said Melchezidek. He drew his cloak more tightly around him, the hyperalgesia of his ancient bones alerting him to every change in direction of the cooling breeze. "I am glad that you put that narrative behind you. Like a mirror, the past has been shattered, but its shards still fly through space and time and sometimes find a place in our hearts. It falls to us to become our own surgeons, remove those splinters of perverted history, and in so doing, set ourselves free. For if we do not, we will see reflected back at us, not our true faces, but the faces of those others who no longer have a place in this world. You must choose, now, Master Pike. Choose to be your own man. Choose to be *free*."

"But what man is that?" I said. The forest was behind us, and I looked down upon the city I knew I would never see again. For though Melchezidek had rescued me, I had only the life of an outcast to look forward to. "And am I really a man at all? The things that I felt today, the *power*. I know I'm part orc – a witch, like you. But today there was something else I discovered within myself. Something more alien than I ever suspected."

"There is an alienness that came before the orcs, came even before the people whom legend calls the lost tribes of the perverse. It is the fount of all the strangeness in the world, and it emanates, not in the universe in which we exist, but in another. It is that which truly makes you an exile, Master Pike. It is that which is the demarcating line, not only between you and the human race, but between the human race as it is now constituted, and humanity as it was in the confused, forgotten past. Your contaminated blood owes its origins not to the liaison that your grandfather entered into with an orc, but to something vastly older and more otherworldly. A liaison our world entered into with a parallel dimension, 4,000 years ago."

"How do I find out who or what I really am?" Today, I thought, today I had been a *superlative* swordsman. How had that metamorphosis come about? "How?" I said aloud, with an earnestness that could not be compromised by a weariness of limbs and spirit.

"Time enough for that, Master Pike. You must think now upon surviving. You're not a lord out here in the wastes. It is now, perhaps, that your true education begins."

I sighed. "Begins? It only begins?"

"You've learnt what you are not, I suppose that's a good enough start for any story. Now you must learn what you are. What you can be. Now you must create your own narrative. It is not enough to revive artefacts. Not enough to look to the Ancients for your example. You must not be a slave to the past. You must subvert it, re-invent it, and in so doing, re-invent yourself, and, perhaps, all mankind." I felt his long-fingered hand on my shoulder. "You are a member of the Order of Black Knights, Master Pike. And you have reached your majority. Do not fear. You can do anything." I put my own hand over his. I owed the old witch my life. It had been foolhardy of him to enter London. A proscribed half-man, he could have easily ended up on the gallows, alongside me. More than friend, he was the only family, I realized, that I had now

the human family had turned their collective back on me.

I had heard voices: my father's, my grandfather's, all the bloody line of the Pikes, and I had heard the voice of my distaff side, the dark song of the Netherworld. And under all this had been the ground bass which prefigured the strangeness and perversity that had proved a dividing line between the Earth of my own age and the Earth of the Ancients; perversity that had emanated from another universe and had confounded our attempts to win objective knowledge. But beneath even this I heard, for the first time, the inspiration of that chorale: the ground of Being to which the multitudinous spheres owed their harmony, the Love that moved the stars. I knew, once heard, that that music would change my life forever and give it meaning.

I had been trapped in a narrative in which I was the Soho highwayman, Macheath; but I had been also trapped in my mechano-materialistic view of life. Only in a philosophy that attended to Being as well as Becoming could mankind rediscover itself and set itself free.

Like the Christians, I had placed my faith in a pseudo-doxo. Truth was not all of one order, and neither was the self.

Could that lost article of faith, Man, be truly revived? Yes, I thought. But not by grubbing amongst the flotsam of the past. Artefacts, holy books – they only offered us an escape from what, in the end, was an ineluctable responsibility. I would redefine what it meant to be human, I decided; I would make it my life's work. I would accept that I enjoyed an atrocious, if heady, freedom, and that I could choose who to be, and what to do.

The breeze whistled through the stony branches, like a child playing with a tin whistle. London was lit, its lights cold and distant. And in its maze of stony streets I tried to descry Soho, where a boy once came to be known as Macheath, and a man lost that name only to find himself without a new one.

The clouds were lucent with moon glow. I gazed down until London's black outlines stood out in relief from the greater blackness of its heart. From that heart, streets extended like capillaries, the red streetlamps of Soho cor-

puscles in a dead man's inert bloodstream. Towers and tenements tangled with the moon-bright sky, like the branches of the gnarled and blasted trees under which I sat. London was a petrified forest. A place of deace. I looked away, into the depths of that other, strangely familiar forest that was to be my place of exile. Unlike the city, the stone about me was vital, full of a strange sap that promised new life, a rebirth from the ashes of the alien. Perhaps my exile would not be so hard as I had supposed.

I became aware that I was about to set off on a long and hazardous voyage. But however far I might journey, and whether or not I might find myself eventually stranded, lost in some distant night of the soul, I was buoyed by the intimation that there would be others who would come after me.

The thin fluting of the wind in the boughs conjured up the catch of an old song. I fastened my gaze upon the Pole star, and made my wish.

*Now I stand like a Turk, with his doxies around,
From all sides their glances his passions confound;
For black, brown, and fair, his inconstancy burns,
And the different beauties subdue him by turns:
Each calls forth her charms to provoke his desires,
Though willing to all, with but one love he retires:
But think of this maxim, and put off your sorrow,
The wretch of today, may be happy tomorrow.*

Richard Calder is from Essex, in England, but currently lives in the Philippines. He published his first short stories with *Interzone* in 1989. His latest of half a dozen novels is *Malignos* (Simon & Schuster/Earthlight, May 2000), which is expanded from a story of the same title we published last year. The above new piece is a fairly remote sequel to that novel, set in the same future world a couple of generations later.

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All it takes is a little imagination!



“How do we look at our life, Frank?”

“How what – ?”

“Our life, our life! What’s the working model of our life?”

Confused, cowering silence.

“Two minutes ago, you assured me, Frank – you assured at least one hundred billion of us – that you’re a devoted listener. From the earliest days, you promised. So the question’s simple. Isn’t it? Our life is what – ?”

“It’s a drawer,” the caller blurts.

“A drawer. Right!” The host has stubby fingers and wide butcher palms. Shuffling the cards with a practised nonchalance, he explains, “At birth, each of us was given exactly the same identical drawer. But ever since, all of us have been putting different objects inside it. Different people. What-have you. And of course we’ve put in some of the same objects, but arranged them in different, unique patterns.”

For a moment, the wet sounds of the quantum surf play across the speakers. Then a quiet, slightly frustrated

voice says, “I know what you mean. I just thought –”

“Your wife, Frank. Your wife.”

“Is an object.”

“But is she set in the front part of your drawer, or shoved way in back?”

“She’s in the middle somewhere, I guess.”

“You’re *guessing*?”

“More towards the front. She is.”

The host rapidly deals the playing cards to himself. “You don’t sound all that sure of yourself, Frank.”

Silence.

“Frank?”

“Like I said. My wife and I’ve been having troubles.”

“I can tell.”

A frustrated sigh. Then the caller says, “It’s because I’m not paying enough attention to her. Is that it?”

“Oh god, no.” The host flips the topmost card on each neat pile, his deep bass voice saying, “Twenty-five years of marriage, and three children raised –”

“The youngest is still with us –”

“Regardless, Frank. You’ve already paid plenty of attention to her. Obviously.” The red ten on the jack of spades. “My advice? Minimize your wife. Set her into the back of that drawer of yours and keep her there.”

“You mean... oh, god... divorce...?”

“I didn’t say that word. You did.” The five of clubs on the six of diamonds. “What I’m saying is that for the next few years, for Frank’s own good, you need to focus on areas outside your immediate family. You’re a man with talents, after all. And rights as well as needs. Maybe you can change careers. Start a new business. Most definitely, you should have an affair. Or two. Does that wife of yours have a baby sister – ?”

“Uh, no...”

“That’s a shame.”

Surf sounds. Quiet, yet tense.

“The point here is... I know you, Frank...!” The host turns over a useless seven. “And believe me, I know better than you what you deserve. Which is the best of everything. And do you know what you should do now?”

“I need to trust you.”

“So do you?”

“Well, yeah... that’s why I called – ”

“A wise man.” The host laughs, setting the nine of clubs on the red ten. “Which leaves it up to you to act on my precious advice. Isn’t that right?”

“My wife’s got a cousin. A young one, and she seems to like me – ”

“That’s the attitude!” He hits the cutoff switch, clearing the line the instant before he shouts, “Thanks for calling, Frank. And thanks for listening, Frank. And now, a word from our most wonderful sponsor...!”

The booth resembles a soap bubble, large enough to contain a crescent-shaped teak desk and a tall custom-fitted chair. The controls are few and simple. Speakers and microphones are built into the rounded wall. The most important man on the planet tilts forward in his chair. He’s barely average-sized, middle-aged, bald and bearded, with capped teeth unnaturally white and eyes too big for any face. Culturing an easy rage, he rises to his feet as the commercial begins to play.

“Success,” says the narrator. “What is it? How is it cultivated, and won? And most important, how can *you* make your own life the endless success that you deserve to enjoy, now and forever – ?”

Muting the commercial, the host pulls the earpiece from his right ear, and screams, “What, what, *what* do you think you’re doing to me?”

The surrounding studio is a vast bubble subdivided into hundreds of transparent chambers, each filled with engineers or minor producers and a spaghetti of cables tied into sophisticated quantum-interface machines. Standing directly outside the booth, expending enormous energy to remain motionless, a youngish producer is wearing a headset and an uncomfortable smile. “I don’t know,” he sputters. “Was there something wrong with that last caller?”

“He was a spineless complainer. That’s what he was.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did you know that before you gave him to me?”

“No, sir. I mean, he sounded fine – ”

“I knew he wasn’t *fine*. With the first *whine*, I knew.”

“Yes, Mr Johnson.”

“How many callers do we have waiting? Right now.”

The producer glances at a readout, then gets curt little nods from his staff. “About a third of a million – ”

“And one of them is interesting, I bet. If you look hard enough.”

“Yes, sir.”

“So get back to work!”

Then the host sits, and with a mixture of theatre and genuine contempt, returns to his card game. The king of spades fills an empty column. A useful three appears on demand. After a few moments, the producer’s voice whispers, “Coming out of commercial.”

The host looks up.

“I’m back,” he purrs, “and I hope you are, too.”

Embedded in the booth’s wall is the image of five spheres, one inside another, a single point of red light past the largest ball. “Our next caller,” the host announces, “lives all the way out past the fifth sphere of influence. Hello to you, Frank!”

“Hello,” says a slightly nervous, utterly familiar voice.

“It is Frank, isn’t it?”

Uneasy laughter. “Yes, it sure is.”

“Well, one of these days it may not be.” A hearty laugh. The host flips three cards and asks, “What can I do for you, brother?”

“I need advice. About money.”

The ace of hearts goes up top. Beneath it is a black five. “You’ve come to the premier source, Frank.”

“The thing is, we’re pretty slow out here. The Japanese just developed quantum-interface technology last summer – ”

“You let them beat you to the punch, huh?”

“Yeah. Which means I’m not in the centre of things. Not like you were, and are – ”

“But you want a killing from the coming boom. Am I right?”

“I’ve got a fair amount of capital.”

“Of course you do. You’re a success on every earth, Frank!”

Caller and host laugh. Then the caller asks, “Where do I put my money? From what I’ve heard, the next few years are going to transform my home earth.”

“You want to know what companies will prosper.”

“Yeah. That’s it.”

“I have no idea, Frank.” The two of hearts. Good!

“But I thought – ”

“Let me give you a canned speech. With apologies to my long-time listeners who’ve heard it a thousand times.” Lifting one hand, he signals his producer with a thumb up. “As you just mentioned, I was shrewd enough to buy an obscure company. It was my good fortune that the company, Gossamer, Inc., was the very first to learn how to send messages to neighbouring earths. And as each earth developed its own quantum-interface technologies – what I like to call the QIs – it’s my Gossamer that usually made first contact with them.”

“You did here,” the caller volunteers.

“Glad to hear it.” He flips another trio of cards. “Sure, I was lucky. But you’re lucky in a different way, Frank. There are limits to this magic. From my point of view, you’re way the hell out there. It takes a powerful signal to reach you, and it takes exceptional equipment at this end to enhance your sweet, sonorous voice –”

“Glad to be heard.”

“Well, you’ll be beside yourself when I make this offer.” Through the beard, a thick-lipped smile blossoms. He sets a two on the ace. “Use your riches to form your own company. An information clearing house. I’ve got my best people ready to send you the boilerplate contract. Sign it, and I’ll give you plans for a more powerful, more sensitive QI. A thousand times better than anything the Japs can muster. Then, as the probability waves carry this technology deep into the sixth sphere, thousands and millions of new earths will find their voice. And you’ll find them. And over the next few years, an economy of pure information is going to evolve. That’s the way it always happens, Frank.”

“That’s what I’ve heard.”

“We can help each other. Send me valuable information, and I’ll give you valuable information. Stuff that’s going to make you a fortune, or ten fortunes, before either of us turns 50.”

From the far reaches of the quantum sea comes the sound of a man’s rapid, eager breathing.

“I’ll get to extend my reach by five more spheres of influence, Frank.” He deals himself a new king. “And I’ll do the same for you. Anything that can be transmitted will be yours. Alloy fabrication. Hit television shows. Medical knowledge. Cheap fusion power. The 10,000 best World Series.” Eyes skip across the cards. “As we reach farther into the quantum sea, the earths will become different. Which’ll make them even more valuable as trading partners.” He deals three cards, then asks, “What do you think, Frank?”

“It sounds... intriguing...”

“Glad to hear it.” He laughs. The ace of hearts is covered up to the five card. The ace of clubs is naked, and two more aces are still hiding.

“Can I think about it awhile – ?”

“Sorry, no. And here’s why: I can’t refuse the others. That wouldn’t be fair. Thousands of earths near you are hearing my voice now. Thousands of us, and they’re all close to you and your earth. And if one of those Franks happens to contact me, begging for the same opportunity that you’re *thinking about* –”

“I’ll take it then.”

“Good.” The ace of diamonds. Finally! “Remain on this line, Frank. My people will be talking to you. And remember this. In our infinite universe, who can you trust? Yourself. That’s who. We Franks have to stick together.”

He hits the cutoff button, then glances at the clock. “Time for a quick call.”

The producer holds up three fingers.

Opening the line, the host says, “Thank you for calling. Hello, Frank.”

A perfect silence replies.

No surf sounds, which implies the caller is in the inner reaches of the first sphere. But when he looks at the

blinking point on the quantum map, Frank Johnson is suddenly confused. Off-balance. “Hello?” he sputters. “Frank...?”

“Hi ya, buddy!”

The host swallows, then says, “What can I do for you?” as he leans closer to the map. No, that’s just plain impossible –

“What’s the cliché? ‘Long time listener, first time caller’? Anyway, buddy. I’ve been listening to you since the beginning, practically.”

“Glad... to hear it...” Frank looks up. His producer as well as dozens of engineers are wearing the same mystified expression. One by one, they look straight into the booth, shrugging their shoulders and shaking their slack-jawed faces.

“You sound a little funny, buddy. You okay?”

Frank swallows, then says, “Always.”

“That’s right. I forgot.” The voice is the same as every caller’s voice, but something in its rhythm is different. Is wrong. “Anyway, I’ve just got this one quick question for you. Ready?”

Another swallow. “Shoot.”

“Do you ever get tired? Of being a know-it-all asshole, I mean.”

Out of reflex, Frank reaches for the cut-off button. But in his earpiece he hears his producer blurting out, “Don’t! Wait!”

Frank hesitates.

Then he sputters, “Who are you?”

A perfect, roaring silence.

The map displays an impossibility: spheres of influence nested within more distant spheres, and out at the edge of at least a thousand levels of diversity is a brilliant point of throbbing red light.

Frank breathes hard and fast, the booth feeling as if it’s pitching beneath him. “If you’re a loyal listener, like you claim, you already know. I don’t appreciate being insulted. Particularly by my brothers –”

“Brothers?” the caller interrupts. “You mean those poor bastards you manipulate to serve your coffers and your oversized ego?”

He jumps to his feet, screaming, “Who the hell are you?!”

“Hey, buddy,” says a voice just as solid and self-assured as Frank’s normal voice. “Hey, Franky boy. That red jack goes on the black lady. See it?”

A standard commercial plays in the background. Orchestrated music swells into the booming voice of an announcer. “The most successful man in the known universe has finally published his riveting life story. Learn the true story of Gossamer, Incorporated! Experience the dizzying ride of his life. And enjoy the perspective that only the great man himself can offer. *Frank Johnson: The View from the Centre*. Now on sale at quality bookstores on a million enlightened earths!”

The great man explodes from the booth. “What do you mean you don’t understand? It’s simple. It’s dirt simple. One of my enemies, and yours, has gotten inside our operation. He’s watching me. He’s screwing around with my machinery. He’s trying to fucking discredit me! Don’t

you see? So quit throwing up this mumbo-shit about odd signal patterns and how you aren't sure where he's calling from...!"

The show's producer nods out of reflex.

A portion of the studio wall is covered with a photograph of the famous Frank Johnson: a black-and-white image smiling over everyone, eyebrows bigger than grown men riding above vast brown eyes that shamelessly project a sense of smug self-satisfaction.

Standing with his back to the photograph, the host wears the opposite expression. He looks and sounds uncertain. And scared. "Who did the final screening? Who talked to that prick before me?"

A young man shuffles out of his cubicle, one arm raised as if he expects it to be unceremoniously chopped off.

"What the hell happened?" Frank asks.

"The caller said... said he wanted advice. About dating movie actresses."

"Didn't you see where he was calling from?"

"We don't check, usually. These maps... aren't all that good.."

"What do you mean?" Frank growls.

"These neat concentric spheres with the local reality at the centre... they're just estimates of what's really happening. All the infinite probabilities getting expressed over boundless dimensions... it's very, very hard to picture what's real..." The assistant fights down a nervous belch, then admits, "No, you're right, sir. I didn't check locations. The caller sounded local, and since we hadn't had anything sexy tonight -"

"You gave him to me."

The assistant glances at the others, desperate for moral support. But no one is willing to fall into that easy trap.

Trying to deflect Frank's anger, the producer steps forward, hands raised, speaking in the reassuring tones. "Whatever happened, it won't happen again. Now that we're on to the prick."

A second commercial starts to run.

Frank's recorded voice shouts, "The Johnson Newsletter. Every month it comes to you, my dear brothers, filled with my shrewd and worldly advice about life and money, and love, and the art of revenge against your enemies...!"

Frank sighs, then asks no one in particular, "How long till the break's done?"

"Twenty seconds," several voices squeak.

"Find out how he managed this trick. And before we're done tonight, fix it."

"Yes, sir," the producer sputters.

Frank warily approaches his booth. "From here on, my calls come out of the general pool. Pull them at random. Let the bastard try to be heard through all those voices...!"

"Yes, sir," everyone cries out.

He hears no one. The booth's door closes for him, and seals, and after a too-long pause, he remembers to say, "Welcome back," with his best attempt at indifference. Then forcing a laugh, he adds, "Sorry for the technical difficulties. The idiots responsible have been executed."

Staff scramble back and forth, opening panels and scanning long cable, frantically hunting for any hidden bugs and booby traps.

The producer looks harried but gives a two-handed thumbs-up.

"Our next caller," Frank manages to say.

Then his fingers hesitate over the switch, and he feels the pressure of eyes, real or imagined, boring into the back of his neck.

It's a local call, relatively speaking. "Hello, Frank. What can I do for you?"

There's the reassuring murmur of countless electrons passing in and out of reality. The voice pushing its way through the murmur is nervous, even timid. "Long time listener, first time caller -"

"Go on," the host prompts.

Is it him?

But the caller's problem and tone say otherwise. "I've been dating a woman... and I love her... but I want to know if I should ask for her hand in marriage..."

"What's the lucky girl's number, Frank?"

The caller blurts out a full name.

The host barely listens. Sighing, he says, "What I need is her social security number, Frank. Names just aren't unique enough."

"Yeah, I knew that." A piece of paper is being unfolded. "Five. Zero. Seven -"

God, this is great drama! Frank thinks, rolling his eyes.

An engineer punches in the ID numbers, then pulls the appropriate file from the central computer. A driver's license photograph appears, the woman middle-aged and gloriously homely, and flanking the photo are a series of brightly coloured graphs.

"Good news, Frank. Except for the bad."

A whispering voice says, "Okay..."

"Fifteen hundred marriages to us. Give or take. And according to the database, we almost never divorce her."

"Well, good..."

"But the thing is, Frank... I'm seeing a big upturn in her death rates. Is that 90 percent? In the last five years, this gal of yours... she's got a real tendency towards some pretty spectacular, incurable cancers..." He pauses for an instant, then sighs and tells him, "Sorry."

"Oh, God."

"Projections show 99 percent mortality in the next five years."

"Sweet God!"

"Sorry," he says again, aware that his voice sounds entirely unsorry. Normally this sort of call would be handled by his staff. By sweet-voiced underlings. But this is the bullshit you get when you pick at random. Frank can practically hear the quantum radios being turned off on a billion earths, sometimes forever.

Quiet little sobs break his rage.

"But hey," he adds, trying to save himself. "You never know. Your little gal could be part of that lucky percent." Nothing.

Frank hits the cutoff button, then says, "Best of luck to you, my good friend." With his thick hands, he sweeps up his cards, out of habit, shuffling them once before taking the next caller.

"Hello, Frank."

"Love you," he hears. "Love you. Love you. Love you!"

“Good to hear. Do you have a question, Frank?”

“Nope.” The voice practically giggles. “I just wanted to tell you that you’re an inspiration to me. Seeing what you’ve done, everything that you’ve accomplished, shows me that my luck is about to change.”

Don’t bet on it, Frank mouths. Then he clears the line and opens another, saying, “Thanks for calling, Frank. Hello, Frank.”

The next few calls are the same. Sycophants are the most likely to try making contact with him. And while it’s never unpleasant to hear their praise, it doesn’t make for a good program. They’re dull losers, without exception. Their lives split from Frank’s ten or twenty or thirty years ago, and those lives have taken them in radically different directions. They talk about luck as if it’s something that changes. They seem to believe that the simple act of talking to a successful version of themselves will transform them. It’s all that Frank can do not to tell each of them, “You’re pathetic, and you deserve to be, and get used to it because that’s never going to change.”

He can’t help but let his mind drift, paying just enough attention to offer a quick “Thank you” when his worshippers grow winded.

Who wants to humiliate him? The question keeps posing itself. His ex-wives are a bitchy lot, particularly the third one: Frank dumped Kimmie just as Gossamer, Inc. was starting to explode. But it’s likely someone with more resources. Maybe someone with a festering business grudge. The computer industry, for instance. They’re still reeling from that AI technology Frank got out of a distant listener. Or maybe one of those self-appointed critics who claim that he’s too powerful for anyone’s good. Sometimes he imagines filling the Johnson Dome with his worst critics – a quarter million shrill-mouthed little bastards – and into that anger he marches, without fear, telling them pointblank that they’re idiots. So what if he’s the most influential man in history? He deserves to be! His company owns the QI technology and every discovery to come from it. Hasn’t every court said as much? This earth is better off than any other earth, by every credible measure. What reasonable person could think otherwise? And once he laid it all out for the final time, he would tell those angry bastards, “If you’re still mad at me, do something about it. Under each of your seats is a Johnson-manufactured pistol. Take them out and use them, you morons. Here I am! You won’t get another chance – !”

The wild firefight would kill everyone inside the Dome. Which was fitting.

But of course the stage would be rigged with some sort of secret passageway. Frank Johnson would drop out of sight at the last instant, safe and giggling like a school kid. The meeting would be a trap, and simply image-thinking about it makes the flesh-and-blood Frank nearly giggle now, cutting off another sycophant with a crisp, “Good to hear from you. Call again soon, my friend.”

The producer grins, flashing another two thumbs up.

The host hits the switch to open the next random line, the words, “Hello, Frank,” waiting on his tongue.

But the caller anticipates his greeting, cutting him off. “Hello again, buddy! How ya’ doing?”

Frank turns in his chair, searching for a microcamera that he knows he could never see. “Do I know you, *buddy*?”

“Yeah, I called once before.”

But it can’t be the same bastard. According to the map, the voice originates from practically next door, from the innermost portion of the local sphere –

“It was a long, long time ago,” the caller adds. “I doubt if you even remember.”

The host takes a deep breath, looking out into the studio. The producer is trying to calm him, hands held in a soothing position, massaging the air as he speaks to him through the earpiece. “It’s all right,” says the young man. “This one looks legitimate. Absolutely legitimate.”

“My name isn’t buddy,” the host purrs. “It’s Frank.”

“Sorry.” The caller pauses, then admits, “Anyway, Frank, I’ve got this problem.”

“That’s why I’m here. What is it?”

“This sounds stupid, I know. You’ll think I’m piss and hang up on me, probably. But the thing is, I’ve had a successful life so far. A couple wives. Dozens of lovers. A few billion in the bank, and enough real power that I can shape things on my earth. Not like you, exactly. But in important ways.”

“Should we be surprised?”

The joke falls on silence. Then the deep voice explains, “This is my problem, Frank. I can’t find lasting satisfaction. I mean, on one level I know perfectly well that I’m living my own life. I feel like I’m making my own choices, and they’re mostly good ones... but on the other hand, intellectually, I realize that all I am is a set of probabilities. Of happenstances.” A half-pause, then he adds, “I’m a million-card deck being shuffled by the universe. And that’s the same for all of us!”

The host looks at his deck of cards, remarking, “You’re taking this many-earth business a little too seriously, brother.”

“Do I? I wish I could believe that.”

Frank makes eye contact with his producer, then mockingly pats his yawning mouth with the flat of his hand.

The producer laughs with a practised vigour.

“How do you do it, Frank? I guess that’s what I want to know.”

“How do I do what?” the host asks himself, with the thinnest of interest.

“Revel in all your success, I mean. Your status.” A pause, then he wonders aloud, “How does a single point inside an enormous probability wave manage to achieve your kind of ego? Can you tell me that, buddy?”

An uneasiness takes Frank by the belly, then squeezes.

But before he can reply, the caller says, “Sure, you’re the most successful Frank Johnson within five or ten spheres of influence. But what’s that? Modern physics claims that all of these trillions of earths are just a fraction of Creation. Who knows what exists in what’s beyond? The total number of you and me dwarfs your audience. The universe shuffles the deck, and on every sort of earth every possible incarnation of us comes to life. Grows up, or not. Marries, or not. And dies. Which isn’t death so much as it’s just the local cessation of an infinite, unremarkable organism.”

“Unremarkable!” Frank bristles, leaning forward with

his elbows on the tabletop and his big eyes shining like torches. "Hey, you! My companies control more than 60 percent of my earth's economy. My fusion plants supply cheap energy for everyone. Entertainment programs culled from the best of every world run night and day on my networks. With my own money, I'm building cities on the moon and Mars, and we're talking about a starship before the end of the decade...!"

"You've been a little lucky," the caller chides. "One of us had to be."

"I don't see anyone else enjoying my brand of success," Frank replies.

"You aren't listening to me, buddy. Sweetheart."

The host leans back in his chair, muttering, "Nothing important's being said."

"Because what I'm saying is perfectly self-evident." A pause. "Consider this. By rights, this corner of the universe is probably average. Probably plenty of other species long ago rode their probability waves into your kind of knowledge. Not to mention quadrillions of earths just like yours, only smarter. Thousands of years smarter, or millions."

"What of it?"

"A lot of intelligence. A lot of opportunity to improve on this miracle technology."

Quietly, Frank says, "Maybe. Maybe not."

"On some earths, Frank exists. And we're nobodies. Yet I bet a lot of us wear their obscurity with a lot more character than you wear your fame."

The thick hand hits the cut-off button.

But the caller's clear, strong voice tells him, "Don't even think it, sweetheart."

Frank slowly drops his hand onto the shuffled deck of cards, and the big eyes gaze out into the studio, watching his staff scramble from machine to machine, frantic gestures and twisted faces brought on by the panic.

The producer holds up a hand-scrawled sign: "Microphones are dead!"

Frank blinks, then focuses on the map. By some miraculous means, the blinking light has moved, now resting in the centre of every sphere.

"Turn over the top card, Frank."

He reaches for the deck.

"The ace of spades," the caller predicts.

It is. Frank finds himself staring at the card for what feels like an eternity, waiting for the smallest trace of surprise.

It never comes.

"Of course on 51 other earths, you turned over different cards. And on the 52nd, you did nothing. And on a multitude of others, you told me to go to hell. Or there were minuscule differences in the angles of your fingers and your head. Or a butterfly in Costa Rica wasn't flapping its wings the same way..."

"Where are you?" Frank blurts. Finally, with a dry little voice.

"A lot closer than Costa Rica, buddy."

For the first time in years, Frank's hands are trembling, scattering the cards across the slick tabletop.

"In the minutes we've talked," he hears, "the probability waves have generated trillions of *you*, each trapped on his own earth."

"Which means?"

"What I'm about to do isn't murder. Not really."

The producer holds up another sign: "What's happening?"

Frank barely notices, asking the voice, "Where are you?"

"Why don't you turn around, Frank?"

He begins to look over his shoulder, then hesitates.

"If you want comfort, think this: in the time it takes you to turn, you'll explode into billions of separate, safe Frank Johnsons."

He does nothing.

"What are the odds, sweetheart? That you'll be the unlucky one, I mean."

Frank swallows, then finally decides to call the bastard's bluff.

No one is there. There's no other version of him, or any stranger. Nothing inside the booth is even slightly out of place.

Frank smiles at nothing for a long, long moment.

Then he calmly opens the next line exactly as the microphones begin working again, an effusive voice saying, "Greetings, buddy! How's it wagging?"

The producer is certain that his career is dead. A redundant string of microphones went dead when the map went wacky, and the staff's current panic comes from the simple fear of retribution. Their boss despises technical difficulties, probably because he doesn't understand how they can happen. For a terror-struck minute, the producer sees his future as the night shift at some no-name liquor store. But that's when the microphones came back to life, and suddenly the boss is wearing a wide, wide smile. Which is peculiar all by itself. And what's more peculiar is the way he fields calls for the rest of show, cheerfully telling each of his fans not to bother listening to him. "I don't have any clue how you should live. Hell, sweethearts, I'm making it up as I go!"

It's not the same Frank Johnson.

The staff whispers the possibility as a joke. At first. But then the man in the booth doesn't sign off with the usual, "Until next week, my brothers!" Instead, Frank announces, "This has been our best broadcast ever, I think. I don't think I can do any better. So this is our last one, too. I'm quitting this business. I've got no right to barge into your lives, and that's what I've been doing for the past few years. So please, accept my humble apologies. Best wishes to all of us, and good night."

It's a joke, of course.

Or a test of some kind. That's what the producer is telling himself when his boss calls everyone together for a post-broadcast meeting.

"It's no joke," Frank announces, anticipating that train of thought. "This was the last time. Each of you will get a full year's severance pay. Naturally. And I strongly advise everyone to apply for work somewhere in Gos-samer, Inc. There's going to be plenty of new opportunities in the coming years."

And with that astonishment out of the way, he calls to his producer, inviting the young man back into the booth for a last-time nightcap.

"What happened in here?" the producer asks, watching his whisky shake inside the glass. "I thought it was a malfunction when the map went crazy –"

"A reasonable assessment," Frank assures.

"But wrong?"

The smile is enormous, and silent.

"It was him, wasn't he? That prick. I saw you turn around, looking for his camera." The producer sips the good liquor, part of him wondering when he will enjoy this luxury again. "Except there isn't any camera. We checked and checked –"

"You're wrong. There were two cameras."

The producer stares at the bright brown eyes, and waits.

"I've got a job for you," says Frank. "A special job."

"What's that... sir...?"

"I want the Johnson Dome. As soon as possible –"

"But you own it. You can fly there tonight, if you want."

"What I want," Frank purrs, "is for you to orchestrate an event. You and I will draw up a list of the top quarter-million people that I've wronged, or who despise me, or whatever... and we'll invite them to a meeting. I want to go speak to all of them. As soon as we can possibly arrange it."

The producer sags, unsure what to make of anything.

Finally, with a limp curiosity, he risks asking, "Are you the same Frank Johnson? Because you don't sound right –"

"Son," says Frank. Then he lays a finger on his lips, pledging him to silence.

"Sorry. Sir."

"Don't be." A big wink. "I'll tell you this. It's still me, pretty much. The same flesh. The same essential brain. The geography is still in its place." He pauses for an instant, then laughs quietly, adding, "What if it's possible, with enough energy and patience, to hear signals from the farthest edges of the quantum sea?"

"You come from there. Don't you?"

"You're listening to the surf one night, and what do you hear? Your own little voice chattering away, telling everyone in earshot that you're a shrewd and lucky turd." He shakes his head. "I bet you'd feel embarrassed, son. Hearing yourself going on and on about every stupid little conquest and vindication... and wouldn't it just gnaw at you, knowing that in this one little corner of Creation, *this* is the best known example of Frank Johnson...?"

"But objects can't be teleported across the quantum sea," says the young man. "As far as I understand the physics, that's an impossible trick –!"

"An unlikely trick. Which is very different from impossible." Frank shows a satisfied sigh, then adds, "With enough energy, you could project a series of tiny machines capable of tracking down the embarrassment to the right earth. And once he's found, you could hit him with a series of tried-and-true epiphanies. Lessons worth learning. That sort of thing. Interfacing directly with the fatty water in the head...!"

"How much energy?" the young man inquires.

"Think of a hundred suns," says Frank. "Picture the energy inside all of them, bottled and then released at the same instant."

"What kind of Frank are we talking about here...?"

The answer comes as a grin. Confident, and gracious.

The young man says nothing, telling himself that he doesn't believe any of this, and waiting for the next impossibility to thunder down on him.

But Frank simply drains his glass with a flourish, then stands with a flourish.

"Before I forget," he says. "At the Dome, will you make sure everyone has a gift waiting under their seats?"

A dry swallow. "What sort of gift, sir?"

"Railguns."

"Sir –?"

"Made from the best Swiss chocolate, please." Then Frank laughs, saying, "That's my little joke to myself."

"But what... if I may ask, sir... what's the purpose of this meeting...?"

"Forgiveness, we can hope." Then Frank pulls out a deck of cards, shuffling them as he adds, "And a cry for help, too."

"Help –?"

"I'll need all of my friends, and my enemies, too," he says, turning up an ace of spades. "I know, I know. This is just an ordinary little universe we've got here. But wait till you see what we can do with it...!"

Robert Reed's previous stories for *Interzone* were "The New System" (issue 138) and "At the Corner of Darwin & Eternity" (issue 148). He is a frequent contributor to the leading American sf magazines and is also known for several novels. He lives in Lincoln, Nebraska.

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Is the sf/fantasy genre doomed again? *The Bookseller's* top 100 fast-selling UK paperbacks for 1999 had unusually few relevant items: Terry Pratchett's *Carpe Jugulum* at #20 (395,583 copies) and *The Last Continent* at #25 (337,768), *Star Wars Episode 1* at #45 (223,644) and... er, that's it.

FILBOID STUDGE

Arthur C. Clarke's breathing difficulties (owing to post-polio syndrome) inspired tasteful sf imagery in a February *Washington Post* profile: "But after every few breaths, Sir Arthur C. Clarke makes a slow whooshing sound as if he were cruising through space, a bit like those fantastic structures that waltzed among the stars in one of the greatest science-fiction films." The Blue Danube Whoosh?

A. E. van Vogt (1912-2000) died on 26 January, after years of fading health and Alzheimer's. He was 87. His Campbellian Golden Age fame was founded on a burst of popular, hugely influential magazine work from 1939 ("Black Destroyer") to the end of the 40s, most of it eventually reworked at novel length. Idiosyncratic theories of writing, like his new concept or plot turn every 800 words, led to high-speed, dreamlike narratives that had almost hypnotic force without necessarily making sense. *Slan*, his first novel and the archetypal sf persecuted-minority story, was widely adopted as a metaphor for fandom. Van Vogt continued to write with diminishing energy into the 1980s, and received the SFWA Grand Master accolade far too late, in 1996. "There," as his own aliens would surely say, "went the author who ruled the sevagram."

Kurt Vonnegut had a nasty fright at the end of January, when a fire at his house led to hospital treatment for smoke inhalation. Apparently he'd tried to rescue papers until extricated by a more sensible neighbour. Despite early "critical but stable" reports, he was soon said to be in good shape.

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Publishers and Sinners. *Dorling Kindersley* embarrassedly confessed a likely £25 million loss for the second half of 1999, thanks to over-optimistic investment in the UK *Phantom Menace* book franchise: 13 million printed but only 3 million sold. "They didn't lose money on my book!" cried John Clute. Meanwhile, *SFX* subscribers assumed the February cover was a rare, immensely valuable misprint, lacking all the usual teaser headlines. Deputy editor *Guy Haley* explains: "Nah, this is our new look for subscription copies only – all subscribers



get a lovely *SFX* cover picture unadulterated by our wibble. Only we forgot to announce it anywhere. Oops!" Editor *Dave Golder* gloated uncontrollably: "They're already changing hands for a fiver in specialist shops."

Thog's Transitive Masterclass.

"Without transition, his body passed from movement to poised stillness..." "Without transition, he shifted into his emergency mode – the state of whetted creative concentration on which his reputation rested..." "Almost without transition, however, his scars had gone as pale as his face..." (all Stephen R. Donaldson, *The Gap into Vision: Forbidden Knowledge*, 1991)

Awards. *Philip K. Dick Award* shortlist, for best US paperback original: *Code of Conduct* by Kristine Smith, *Not of Woman Born* ed Constance Ash, *Tower of Dreams* by Jamil Nasir, *Typhon's Children* by Toni Anzetti, *Vacuum Diagrams* by Stephen Baxter, and *When We Were Real* by William Barton. *Whitbread Award*: after hot debate this went to Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*, with J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* winning the children's division. The jury was split 4-5 on making the latter the overall winner, whereupon Anthony Holden threatened to "publicly dissent" if a children's book were honoured, and Anne Widdecombe added that such a shocking choice would bring contempt and ridicule to the entire nation. On the other side, A. N. Wilson grumbled that *Beowulf* was "a boring book about dragons." *BSFA Awards* novel shortlist: *ThigMOO* by Eugene Byrne, *Silver Screen* by Justina Robson, *Children of God* by Mary Doria Russell, *Headlong* by Simon Ings, *The Sky Road* by Ken MacLeod. Shorts, all from *Interzone*: "Gorillagram" by Tony Ballantyne

(#139), "Hunting the Slarque" by Eric Brown (#141), "Malignos" by Richard Calder (#144), "The Lady Macbeth Blues" by Stephen Dedman (#148), "White Dog" by Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff (#142).

As Others See Us. More merry litcrit snobbery emerged on BBC Radio 4's *A Good Read* (11 January), as Frederick Raphael and others struggled to define Ronald Wright's *A Scientific Romance* as non-sf. No matter that its protagonist uses the Wellsian time machine to seek a future remedy for incurable disease, encountering long-term effects of global warming: the panel decreed that this couldn't be sf, because they liked the book and – Raphael's clincher – *it wasn't written in the future tense*.

R.I.P. *Marc Davis*, one of the "nine old men" of classic Disney animation, died on 12 January at age 86. *Peter Kuczka* (1923-1999), influential Hungarian sf critic and publisher, died on 3 December. *Gil Kane* (1926-2000), still-active comics artist best known for 50s/60s "Silver Age" work on *Green Lantern* and *Atom*, died of cancer on 31 January. He was 73. *Don Martin*, who came to fame as a zany cartoonist in *Mad* magazine's heyday, died of cancer on 6 January at age 68. He illustrated several sf stories for *Galaxy* in the 50s; after falling out with *Mad* in 1987, he worked for its rival *Cracked*.

Spectrum SF is a new quarterly paperback magazine whose launch issue (February 2000) features Keith Brooke, Eric Brown, Garry Kilworth, Alastair Reynolds, Keith Roberts and megastar Charles Stross. £3.99 (4-issue sub £14, 8 for £24) from Spectrum Publishing, PO Box 10308, Aberdeen, AB11 6ZR. No unsolicited submissions as yet.

Thog's Masterclass. *Dept of Paws for Thought*: "Only Lily could tell there was more to it, because whatever was haunting the back of his eyes made a trail of uneasy paw prints up her own spine." (Charles de Lint, *Someplace to be Flying*, 1998) *Dept of Sound Effects*: "The horse's fall had the sound of a bag filled with rocks and lamp oil, landing beside him and rolling over his legs." (Steven Erikson, *Gardens of the Moon*, 1999) *Dept of Non-Euclidean Geometry*: "She wore a thin metal necklet of some sort, as well, and he scrutinised it with almost equal curiosity. It supported a plastic cube a half-inch square and a quarter-inch thick." (David Weber, *The Apocalypse Troll*, 1998) *Dept of Metaphor*: "Although the project would ultimately be aborted, this represented the moment that *Star Trek: Phase II* was born." (Ed Gross, *SFX* #61)

Sailing to Byzantium

Canadian fantasist Guy Gavriel Kay first came to prominence in the mid-1980s, with the publication of his trilogy “The Fionavar Tapestry.” Other highly-praised novels have followed, and this year he is Guest of Honour at the British Easter SF Convention, to be held in Glasgow in April. (The following interview was conducted by e-mail, some months in advance of that event.) Before emerging as a novelist in his own right, he worked with Christopher Tolkien on editing J. R. R. Tolkien’s unfinished *The Silmarillion* (1977), and it was perhaps inevitable that Kay’s early work would be compared to Tolkien’s. With some writers, one might detect a gradual evolution or progression in their work; but with Kay it is otherwise:

“I see it more as a major demarcation line, rather than a smooth progression in a given direction. Yes, ‘Fionavar’ was written very consciously as a gauntlet thrown to ‘barbarians in the temple.’ I’ve used that phrase for so long now, I should probably get rid of it! An argument that the ‘matter’ of high fantasy could still have vitality and not just be recycled Tolkieniana. That the same source materials he used could still be drawn upon and differently employed, that they weren’t ‘exhausted’ by cloning and imitations.

“But when ‘Fionavar’ was done, and generously received – and in this genre that always means requests for more – my personal horror of repeating myself kicked in, augmented by a perception that successful works in the genre lead their authors to repeat themselves too often. So *Tigana* was conceived as a departure, for me, and for the form. Moving from gods and mortals to entirely human-scaled conflict, shifting away from myth towards history, tying the central use of magic to a metaphor about cultures and history (instead of just treating magic as the defining element of what *makes* a book a fantasy), examining a hugely important, to my mind, issue about the relationship between culture and language, by way of names and the erasing of a people’s history.

“So there was the demarcation line. The books following *Tigana* have continued the immersion in history. *Tigana* takes a flavour from a period, the later books take more than that. In that

Guy Gavriel Kay

interviewed by

Liz Holliday

sense I agree with you, there’s that progression, but I’d say the magical, or – perhaps better put – the supernatural plays a significantly greater role in ‘The Sarantine Mosaic’ than it does in either *The Lions of Al-Rassan* or *A Song for Arbonne* which preceded it. So that undermines any tidy attempt to track a progression. In general, I’m suspicious of tidy categorizations, anyhow.”

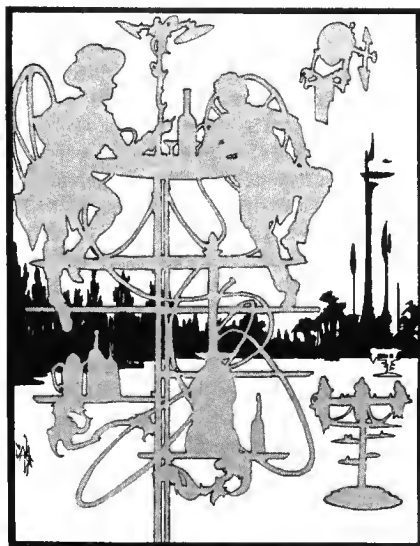
Kay’s latest work is the second half of “The Sarantine Mosaic,” a diptych which tells the story – among other things – of Crispin, a mosaicist from Varenna, and his journey to Sarantium, where he becomes embroiled in court politics and the life of the city. In “The

Fionavar Tapestry” there was a clear parallel between the structure of the story and the metaphor of the tapestry in the way the narrative threads moved back and forth. In “The Sarantine Mosaic” Kay cuts rapidly between storylines and characters to build up a rich picture of life in the city and beyond it, just as a mosaicist builds up a picture from discrete chips of colour.

“There’s a lot going on with mosaic in the books. Aside from the obvious use of a mosaicist as protagonist, my feeling is that our *idea* of Byzantium is significantly shaped by mosaic images we’ve seen, if only glancingly. Those hieratic, formal, utterly beautiful images in places like Ravenna. Mosaic was also seen as a form with aspirations to endure, and the two books are greatly concerned with the ways in which men and woman try to address the idea of mortality, how we attempt to do something that will cause us to be remembered, even if it is just how we raise our children. The ‘permanence’ of mosaic is contrasted in the books to things like chariot-racing, dance, even the glitter of memorable personalities.

“So, in keeping with this, some aspects of the ‘style’ took shape. The prologue of *Sailing to Sarantium* has several purposes, but one of them (in this context) was to use a method that evoked mosaic. Mosaicists do *not* ‘blend’ colour as painters generally do. Mosaic achieves its effect by sharply contrasting colours laid adjacent to each other to *produce* the illusion of a blend, when seen from a distance. The prologue, with rapidly altering viewpoints and very different sorts of scenes butted up against each other was meant as a formal evoking of that effect. It was also intended to try to give a sense, off the top, of the complexity and glitter and raw energy of Sarantium, since I knew the first half of the book would involve going *towards* the City, and I wanted the reader to have an image of the destination... but that’s another issue and not related to the mosaic question. The cast of ‘The Sarantine Mosaic’ is huge, which presents certain problems of handling – of focus and balance.

“I’m a bit amused by this. It underscores how much of reading is beyond the writer’s real control. If I were



asked to say, I'd suggest that criticisms have gone exactly the *opposite* way vis-à-vis my work... that Kay never met a supporting character he didn't like! That readers looking for pure 'cut-to-story' fiction feel slowed down by attention to motivation and my own interest in giving some dimension to the supporting figures, not just the protagonists.

"Of course a writer needs to balance the demands of the narrative against the fleshing out of characters, but each writer will have different interests on this continuum (and different skills, for that matter), and I'd also say each book will have different demands in this regard (this also applies to elements such as prose style, which you query elsewhere here)."

With such a huge cast and complicated narrative structure, it's almost inevitable that some readers will wish that a different balance had been struck – more of one character or storyline, less of another:

"There will *always* be readers who wish more of one figure or another. I *did* want a little of the sense that as people's lives change there are figures who were once important who recede, just by circumstance. Kasia is one such, for Crispin... but my own feeling is that her linking with Carullus is prepared for in the first book and feels 'right' psychologically. She makes a pragmatic choice about marriage and is 'surprised' by the degree of affection that emerges."

Unlike some series, the two books which compose "The Sarantine Mosaic" – *Sailing to Sarantium* and *Lord of Emperors* – form an almost unbroken narrative. In some ways, it's almost impossible to appreciate the themes in the first book until one has read the second. Both the size and the price of big books – and taken together, the two halves of "The Sarantine Mosaic" are very large – can sometimes present problems. Had a commercial decision been made to split the work in two?

"No commercial pressure was put on me at all, by anyone. The diptych was presented to the publishers as such. The story was conceived of as one long tale, but I became aware quite early that the *architecture* of it (something I think about a great deal in each book) was making *Sailing* a book in itself, not just 'Part 1' of something. *Sailing* tracks a journey and arrival, a formal journey and an inward one, and it takes its cue from Yeats (as does so much of the 'Mosaic') in the idea of 'death-in-life and life-in-death'... the crossing movements of these things. Crispin moving from death to life, the alchemized souls going the other way. *Lord of Emperors* widens the focus greatly, has a different architecture. The beginning, cutting to Rustem in

“...fantasy
precludes the
reader, even the one
versed in a period,
from being certain
where the story’s
going.”

the east would not work (for me) unless it actually *began* a book, not just a section.”

"The Sarantine Mosaic" is not only long, it also has a large cast of characters and a complex internal chronology. Just how difficult was it to keep track of all of it?

"I suppose one virtue of getting older – there aren't that many! – is that I've been at this for a long time now and certain formal aspects of the writer's trade are simply learned over the years. Yeats, as it happens, has a poem about this too... about how, as he aged, nothing came easier to his hand than the 'accustomed' toil of writing. It doesn't come easily to me, but certain technical elements, such as the one you are querying *do* become... internalized. One doesn't have to reinvent the wheel. The same is true of craft-based aspects such as the cutting between points of view or the playing with time and chronology."

At the end of the diptych, Crispin makes two contrasting mosaics. One shows some of them as stylized archetypes; the other shows a slightly different group as 'real people.' This, in some ways, seems to work as a commentary on the work as a whole:

"The final pair of mosaics had more to do, for me, with the assertion of personality and self into a milieu and medium

that stressed the formal and hieratic. I'm being somewhat a-historical here to make a point and explore a theme about craftsmen vs artists and ways of 'seeing' the world. Having said this, I *always* stress, and want to do so here, that the author's analysis of his or her own purpose, or results, are not the *end* of any such discussion, and reading your question I am struck that the final mosaics can indeed be read as a metaphor for the whole issue of archetypes vs individuals and that this is absolutely central to fantasy literature."

"The Sarantine Mosaic" is set in the same world as Kay's earlier novel *The Lion of Al-Rassan* – a world which closely parallels our own. Sarantium is obviously Byzantium, making Valerius II and Alixana, Justinian and Theodora. The religious parallels are also fairly clear. So, how close are the parallels – and is it a concern that some readers may not pick up on them?

"The 'Mosaic' manifestly takes its cues from Justinian and Theodora and their court. It also tackles certain religious conflicts (Iconoclasm, various other heresies) and their impact on the history of art and politics. On the other hand, this moves pretty quickly into fantasy. The Iconoclasts showed up in a powerful way *many* generations later than the 6th century. The real daughter of Theodoric the Great (Amalasantha) did *not* survive to sail from Italy to Constantinople (though there is good evidence she was invited) – she died, almost certainly murdered. The course of events was utterly otherwise, on the large and the small scales. As a result, my purpose and hope – and it has been for several books – is to satisfy both kinds of reader. The ones, even the scholars, who *know* the period(s) I'm working with and see both the links and the deliberate deviations, and the reader who knows absolutely nothing about the time but gets (again, this is what I hope) a page-turner that also offers some cause for thought, and emotional response, about themes in our past – and our present."

The tone of the book is, perhaps, fairly cool; and the structure is complex, with a fair amount of rapid cutting between scenes and weaving back and forth in time, sometimes showing the same scene from different points of view. Was this mode chosen because to some extent it's a way of making fiction read like history?

"This is hugely complex and I'm conscious that in a quickly typed reply I'm not going to be able to adequately explore it. (A limitation of e-mail interviews without the back-and-forth of real ones.) Some notes towards an answer, as it were. One, we conceptualize Byzantium in a more formalized way than, say, Renaissance Italy. It is 'eastern,' subtle, complex, a bit more

'alien,' certainly more distant from us, more structured – the rituals of court, the style of art, the imitative, highly stylized writings we have. Two, the two books are *very* much about how things are preserved, *what* is preserved and what is lost, the role of the 'recorders' (historian vs artist, at the end, contrasting versions of events). The title of the second volume is pretty explicitly a signposting, in one of its meanings, towards this. As such, an 'historian's' voice for the narrative style, at times, seemed proper. Indeed, if you go back to the very first paragraph of *Sailing* you'll see a reference to truths and lies and historians. Three, some of this story is also a 'discussion' of attitudes to history and the past. The debate between those who see history as the doings of the 'great' and those, following upon the influential French *Annales* historians, who charge that this ignores the history of the 'unrecorded' and chase down those sources that give us the details of the 'common' man and woman. 'Sarantium' is deliberately a working through of some of these issues and so the authorial voice will sometimes enter to achieve that. Having said all this, and being conscious that there's a lot more to say, I'm not sure I agree the tone is as 'cool' as all that. I've had people say they wept through the last four chapters and I was hugely aware, myself, of an emotional intensity. I don't write as 'operatically' as I did, say, in 'Fionavar' in the early 1980s, but there's an attempt to achieve some of the same effects in different ways."

The form of the book, though, does mean that in some cases the reader actually knows what the outcome will be – though in a way, that makes it more like reading history, where that is often the case.

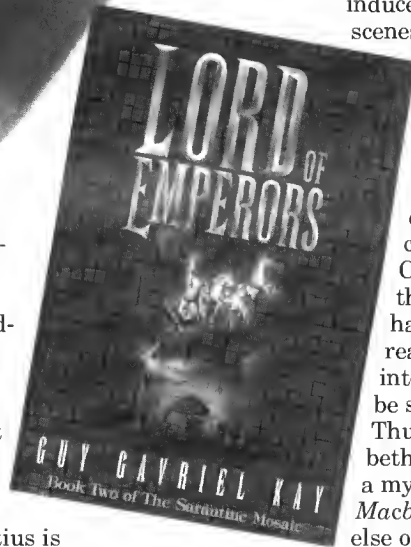
"To be honest, I think this is simply a mistaken question or reading. The whole *point* here is that you do *not* know the outcome, even if you know the 'real' history. The events of history were *very* much different from those in the 'Mosaic,' especially as the second volume proceeds, and *this* is the point of the Epigraph to that volume – also from Yeats, but a non-Byzantium poem. The 'widening gyre' is the increasing movement *away* from tracking real events, into the realm of fantasy... the very ending, for me, takes part of its energy and, I hope, its satisfaction and resonance from that."



Though that's certainly true in the larger sense, there are certainly individual scenes where Kay allows the reader to know the outcome of an event well in advance. As an example, there's the sequence when Sortius is injured and hidden away – and the reader is told almost immediately that he at least gets well enough to send letters to people:

"It never occurred to me to leave it in doubt that he'd survive the initial treatment by Rustem. Perhaps a trope of fiction... the idea of how banal it would be to have him taken, at risk and with a brilliant idea, to the competent physician, and then have him die of gangrene or loss of blood during treatment. Too much bathos. So I didn't put any *weight* on the idea of suspense *at that* point. The tension was to arise later, when he leaves to race.

"Incidentally, for what it is worth, the ending of *Sailing* was not meant to be some huge cliffhanger (Who is the woman at the bottom of the scaffold?). That's why the identity is tossed off so



early and casually in *Lord*. The point of the ending of volume one was to have the reader realize that the important thing isn't for *whom* Crispin comes down but that he *does* come down. None of the women, at that point have been given enough weight to carry the romantic implication of being named as his reason for descent. The idea is that he comes back to life, to interaction, down from ascetic withdrawal. He completes his sailing."

Although Zoticus's birds played a central role in the plot, there's really very little in the way of magic in the book – even the episode with the Zubir and the birds' telepathy could almost be products of Crispin's imagination. Or could they?

"God, no, I hope not! I don't think there's any suggestion from me – much as our age and society play up the notion of, I suppose, the psychologically induced hallucination – but the scenes between Zoticus and

Crispin, and then later Linon and Crispin, are deliberately precise and matter-of-fact and formally specific as to the source of the alchemy. I don't think any reader could *actually* read this as Crispin just imagining these things. On the other hand, I should note that readers can read *anything* into books and I shouldn't be so emphatic. Remember Thurber's brilliant 'The Macbeth Murder Mystery,' where a mystery fan, forced to read *Macbeth* for lack of anything else on a rainy holiday, interprets it by the canons of her

genre and asserts, explaining with reference to the text, that Macbeth was framed for the murder of Duncan."

Even though the text doesn't support that reading, it wouldn't have taken much tweaking of the plot to produce essentially the same book without any overt fantasy elements – albeit at great cost to the thematic resonances Kay has so carefully set up:

"Agreed. What would be lost, for me, is the resonance, or flavour of Byzantium as we imagine it in the west. I really believe that magic, by way of mystery or the mystic, the supernatural, is a large component of that perception, and Yeats's verses – echoed, quoted, throughout the text – are a reflection of that and contributors to it. *I hail the superhuman; I call it*

death-in-life and life-in-death. And: A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains / All that man is, / All mere complexities, The fury and the mire of human veins. And much more from both Byzantium poems.”

Were there advantages – or, perhaps, disadvantages – to writing “The Sarantine Mosaic” as a fantasy rather than as a straight historical novel? One possibility that comes to mind is the way it might allow difficult issues – particularly the religious ones that are part of the core of the end of the book – to be dealt with.

“That last question, a good one, actually surfaced more with respect to *Lions* and the treatment of three cultures in Spain. My theme was the interplay of three differing cultures and religions, not the precise dictates or beliefs of three faiths, and I *did* feel it might be a strength for author (and thus reader) to offer some of the detachment that fantasy affords.

“As for the overall strengths of fantasy in my ‘method,’ this is another one that demands an essay (and I’ve written a couple!). I’ve hinted at some aspects of it en route through this interview. For example, the way in which fantasy precludes the reader, even the one versed in a period, from being certain where the story’s going. The way in which it allows telescoping of events and themes to sharpen the focus on those aspects that engage me. The manner in which, for me, it underscores a measure of respect for real lives and real people... I make no pretence that I have the least idea of what the actual Justinian and Theodora said to each other in intimate, private moments of doubt or passion: my figures are clearly meant to evoke them but as clearly they are *not* those people. I think fantasy as a means of addressing elements of history has a hugely important and as-yet-untapped role to play once people get past the trap of seeing it as an escapist, trivial genre.”

Through the course of the diptych, Kay builds a glittering, yet realistic, picture of life in Sarantium, from the palaces of the Emperor to the kitchens of the inns and the workshops of the mosaicists. One of the ways he does this is by picking out the details of people’s professions – from cooking to medicine to chariot racing... and of course, mosaic-making:

“All these things *become* particular interests as a book’s research unfolds for me. I knew absolutely nothing about mosaic or chariots or the roadside inns of Late Antiquity or Byzantine cooking when I began. I did know a fair bit about medieval medicine from the research for *Lions*, but had to go further back (and into the east) for these books. Details like this are hugely

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important and extremely tricky. God is in the details, and so is the devil. An over-fussy, showy demonstration of how much one knows (I think Tom Wolfe’s endlessly guilty of this in his fiction, his desire to show what a good *reporter* he is – and he’s a wonderful reporter – undermines his novels) is a trap to be avoided, but on the other hand, it is *so* wonderful to be able to draw upon core details of fact to bring a character or setting out. One of my favourite moments in the diptych is when Crispin’s visual nature, as a mosaicist sensitive to the play of light, is the *reason* he’s able to solve the chariot-racing ‘riddle’ during his first encounter with the court. The plot and character *fit* there and the author, at least, likes it.

“I’m also firmly of the belief that the way to show someone as being gifted at something is *not* to just declaim it at regular intervals like a clock tolling the hour, but to show his or her *technical* expertise. You show that an artist knows his work by showing him versed in the minutiae of his trade, and the same is true of a physician or an athlete, or a ruler, for that matter. The details here underscore the points one wants to make about people.”

When we first meet Crispin and his colleagues, Kay makes the point that mosaicists never signed their work. Yet at the end, Crispin does just that,

as if he has come to some realization – perhaps about the nature of art, or about his own needs as an artist and man – of the need to leave something personal behind him. In that sense, this later work is very much linked to the earlier *Tigana*; and perhaps because of it, one might almost have expected him to immortalize not the courts of Sarantium, but his own dead daughters, as he had already done in the mosaic for the dome of the Sanctuary that was not allowed to remain:

“Yes, of course. A major motif. The anonymity of the mosaicists is stressed, especially in the Sleepless Ones’ chapel. So, yes, there’s an assertion of the self, the identity, the ‘having been here’ in what Crispin does at the very end. It is somewhat a-historical, again (a bit like what Barry Unsworth does in *Passion Play* with the fortuitous ‘invention’ of modern theatre in the context of a Medieval Mystery Play meeting a murder) but felt consistent with the overarching points of the story having to do with legacies and leaving a memory... and yes, certainly there’s a link to the names/identity aspect of *Tigana*.

“As for the dead family... for me, he had *done* that. The fact that some other forces obliterated it didn’t erase in *his* mind that he had achieved that homage/recollection. In a real way, it would have been a denial of his own work on the Sanctuary dome to repeat the portraits.”

The Sarantine Mosaic is set in the same world as *The Lions of Al-Rassan* – yet Kay didn’t initially plan the work that way:

“I actually didn’t *begin* the research for *Sarantium* with the intention of using the same world as *Lions*. My first notebook has this as a query-thought, early on, and it gradually seemed more and more logical, primarily because I had the sun-god faith in place so nicely and the scope for possible heresies was evident. And as it became clear my protagonist would be a mosaicist, and with mosaic as an art form built around Light, it seemed almost criminal *not* to stay with the sun-god elements. Once I made that decision, obviously, a great many other motifs kicked in. But it wasn’t planned at the outset... the fuzziness in the east of the map to *Lions* (which some readers have written me about) demonstrates that!

“What I think it really demonstrates is something I always tell people but readers sometimes don’t believe: at the end of every book I’m really not sure where I’m going next. And that’s as true right now as it ever is. So far the fallow period has always ended up producing an idea and a book. I have to assume it’ll do that again – the alternative’s too depressing to contemplate!”

La

*T*ampirese

Going up to the elevator, he felt a wave of depression so intense at what he was about to do, that he almost rushed out at another floor. But then what would he see? The eerie elongate building was frosted with a dry desert cold. On the ground floor he had already encountered strange sliding, creeping or slipping shades. He had glimpsed creatures – things – he didn't want to be at large among. And anyway, there was the man with him in the lift, "helping" him to reach the proper place.

"How is she today?" he had asked, when they first got in.

"As always."

"Ah."

And that was all.

Ornamental, the elevator had fretted screens of delicately wrought white metal. Its internal light was soft, but not warm, and when the cage finally rattled to a halt, and the screens parted, a cold blast hit him from an open window.

"Is that safe?"

"What?" asked the man.

"That window – surely..."

"That's fine. See the grill?"

He looked and saw the grill. And in any case now they were in the heart of a desert night. The sunset had been sucked under, sucked up like red blood, in

Tanith Lee

the minute or so of the elevator's ascent. Stars glittered out in the black sky, undimmed even by the lights of this immense, automated mansion. Soon a moon would rise.

"Thanks," he said humbly, to the attendant. Should he tip him? Perhaps not. The man was already undoing a door, and it seemed *he* should go through – go through alone. And now, after the depression, for a moment he was afraid.

"Am I OK in there?" He tried to sound flippant.

The attendant smiled suddenly, contemptuous as a wolf. "Sure. It's all right, you know. She's sated."

"She is?"

"Yes. Quite."

"Sated."

"Yes."

"How?" he heard himself ask. The ghoulish word hung there in the slightly-warmed cold air.

The attendant said, "Best not to ask, mister."

"No..."

"Best not to ask," the man repeated, as fools or the nervous or the indomitable often did.

But this time, he resisted, himself, doing so.

And then he was through the door, which – as it seemed with its own laughter – shut fast and closed him in.

The first thing he saw in the great wide room was the Christmas tree. It was that blue-green variety, about two metres tall, and growing in a stone pot. He knew of the tree, had indeed seen pictures of it, both stills and photographs. Probably not the *same* tree, but the same type of tree, and decorated approximately in the same way, for it was hung with long pearl necklaces.

The room was luxurious. Thickly carpeted, with deep chairs upholstered in what looked like velvet, or leather. The drapes were looped back from two tall windows, in one of which the moon was now coming up from the desert.

In fact, this whole room was very like the other room, the room he had seen photographs of. Not absolutely, he supposed, but enough.

He looked around carefully. On a gallery up a stair were book-stacks lined with volumes of calf and silk, gilded. A globe stood up there on a table, and down here one long decanter filled with dark fluid, and two crystal goblets.

"It isn't blood."

He snapped around so fast a muscle twanged at the top of his neck.

Christ. She had risen up silent as the moon rose, out of that chair in the corner, in the half light beyond the lamps, a shadow.

"No, truly, not blood. Alcohol. I keep it for my guests."

He knew what to do. And if he hadn't known, he had had it droned into him by everyone he had had to deal with, lawyers, his own office, and inevitably the people here. So he bowed to her, the short military bow of a culture and a world long over. But not, of course, for her.

"Madame Chaikassia."

"Ah," she said. "At last. One who knows how to say my name."

Naturally he knew. He had known from the day he saw her in an interview on TV. Rather as he had seen the

actress Bette Davis in an interview years before, and she had been asked how her first name was pronounced. So that he therefore knew it was *not* pronounced, as most persons now did, in the French way, Bett, but – for he had heard the actress herself reply – as Betty. And in the same way he knew the female being before him now did not pronounce her name as so many did: Ché Kasee-ah, but Ch^hhigh-kazya.

She did not ask who *he* was. They would have told her, when they said he would be coming. After all, without her permission he would never have been allowed into this room. And all the way here, if the truth were known, he had been sweating, thinking she would, after his journey of two thousand miles and more, suddenly change her mind.

"Help yourself," she said idly, "to a drink."

So he thanked her, and went and poured himself one. To his surprise, when he sipped it, it was a decent malt whisky. Despite her words he expected anything but alcohol. Yet obviously they knew *she* would never drink *this*.

When she beckoned to him he sat down facing her, where she had once more sat down. The side lamps cast the mildest glow, but behind her the harsh white neon of moon was coming up with incredible rapidity. It would shine into his face, not hers.

In the soft, flattering light, he studied her.

Even under these lamps, she looked old. He had been prepared for that. No one knew her exact age, or those who did kept quiet. But twenty, twenty-five years ago, when he had seen her in that interview, or more recently in little remaining clips of film, she had looked only a glamorous thirty, forty. Now he would have said she was well into her sixties. She looked like that. Except, of course, she was still glamorous, and still she had her wonderful mask of bones, on which the flesh stayed pinned, not by surgery but by that random good luck which chance sometimes handed out, just now and then, to the chosen few.

In fact, she was still beautiful, and he had a feeling even when she looked seventy, eighty, one hundred, she would even then keep those two things, the glamour and the beauty.

Although again, probably she wouldn't live that long, not now. Now she was in captivity, and ruined.

She lost a little more each day, they had told him that. A little more.

But you'd never know.

Her hair was long as in the old pictures and just as lustrous and thick, though fine silver wires of the best kind of grey silked through it. She wore a minimum of make-up, eye-shadow and false lashes. No powder he could detect. And though her lips were a startling scarlet, it was a softer scarlet to suit the aging of her face.

Her body, like her throat, was long and slender. She wore one of those long black gowns, just close enough in fit he had seen, in her rising and sitting, that her figure looked, at least when clothed, like that of a woman half her apparent age. And she had on high heels – black velvet pumps on slender tapering pins. She had surrendered very little, that way.

As for her hands, always the big giveaway, she wore mittens of thin black lace, and her nails were long and

painted dull gold.

"Well," she said. "What do you wish to know?"

"Whatever you're kind enough to tell me."

"There is so much."

"Yes."

"Time," she said. She shrugged.

"We have some time."

"I mean, my time. Such a great amount. Like the snows and the forests. Like the mountains I saw from the beginning of my life. And always in moonlight or the light of the stars. So many nights. Centuries, and all in the dark."

She had hypnotized him. He felt it. He didn't struggle. But she said, "Don't be nervous," as if he had stuttered or flinched or drawn back. "You know, don't you, you are perfectly safe with me tonight?"

"Yes, Madame Chaikassia."

"That's good. Not everyone is able to relax."

"I know," he said, "that you've given your word. And you never break your word."

She smiled then. She had beautiful teeth, but they were all caps. Thank God, he thought, with a rare compassion, she had not needed new teeth until such excellent dentistry had become available.

He could remember the little headline in a scurrilous magazine: *False Fangs for a Vampire*.

"Do you know my story?" she asked, not coyly, but with dignity.

Surely it would be impossible not to respond to this pride and self-control? At least, for him.

"Something of it. But only from the movies, and the book."

"Oh, my book." She was dismissive. Any authorial arrogance had left her, or else she had never had any. "I did not write everything I should have done. Or they would not let me. Always there are these restraints."

"Yes," he said.

She said, "It must surprise you to find me here."

He waited, careful.

She sighed. She said, "As the world shrinks, I have been taken like an exotic animal and put into this zoo – this menagerie. And I have allowed it, for there was nothing else I could do. I am the last of my kind. A unique exhibit. And of course, they feed me."

At the vulgar flick of her last words, he found, to his slight dismay, the hair crawled on his scalp. Then curiosity, his stock-in-trade, made him say, "Can I ask you, Madame, in the realm of food, on what do they –?"

"On what do you *think*?"

She leaned forward. Her black eyes, that had no aging mark on them beyond a faint reddening at their corners, burned into his. And he felt, and was glad to feel, an electric weakening in his spine.

If only I could give you what you need.

He heard the line in his head, as he had heard and read it on several occasions. But he kept the sense not to say it.

She had given her word, La Vampiresse, that she would not harm him. But there was one story, if real or false he hadn't been able to find out. One journalistic interviewer had teasingly gone too far with her, and left this place in an ambulance.

So he only waited, letting the recorder tick unheard in his pocket – they had said she didn't object to such machines, providing she didn't have to see or hear them.

And she leaned back after a moment and said, "They bring me what I must have. It is taken quite legally. And only from the willing, and the healthy."

He risked it. "Blood, Madame."

"*Blood*, monsieur. But I will tell you something. They must, by law, disguise what it is."

"How is that possible?"

"They add a little juice, some little meat extract or other. This is required by the government. Astonishing, their hypocrisy, would you not say?"

"I'd say so, yes."

"For everyone knows what I am, and what I must have, to live. But in order to protect the sensibility of a few, they perpetrate a travesty. However," she folded her hands, her rings dark as her eyes, "I can taste what it really is, under its camouflage. And it does what it must. As you see. I am still alive."

He had been an adolescent when he saw her first, and that was on film. He was not the only one whose earliest sexual fantasies had been lit up all through by La Vampiresse.

But also, romantically, he had fallen in love with her world, recreated so earnestly on the screen. A country and landscape of forests, mountains, spired cities on frozen rivers, of winter palaces and sleighs and wolves, and of darkness, always that, where the full moon was the only sun. Russia, or some component of Russia, but a Russia vanished far away, where the aristocrats spoke French and the slavery of serfdom persisted.

As he grew up, found fleshly women that, for all their faults, were actually embraceable, actually penetrable, he lost the dreams of blood and moonlight. And with them, perhaps strangely, or not, lost too the romance of *place*. So that when, all these years after, he had been looking again at the film, or at those bits of it which had been – aptly – dug up, he was amused. At himself, for ever liking these scenarios at all. At the scenarios themselves, their naïvety and censored charms. Oh yes, the imagination, in those days, sexual and otherwise, had had to work overtime. And from doing it, the imagination had grown muscular and strong. So that in memory after you saw what you had *not* been shown, the fondling behind the smoky drape, that closed boudoir door, or even the rending among that hustle of far-off feeding wolves...

Altogether, he was sorry the romance had died for him with his youth. What was more, though they had only been, to begin with, such images, a recreation, coming here he grew rather afraid she too, La Vampiresse herself, would also disappoint. Worse, that she would horrify him, with scorn or pity or disgust.

But now, sitting facing her, he had to admit he was nearly aroused. Oh, not in any erotic way. Better than that – *imaginatively*. Those strong imagination-muscles hadn't after all wasted completely away. For here and now he was filling in once more the hidden or obscured vision. So that under her age, still, he could make out what she had been and was, in her own manner.

And when she spoke of her food, the blood, he didn't want to smile behind his hand or gag at the thing she had told him. He felt a kind of wild rejoicing. Despite the fact she was here in this building in the desert, despite her growing old and – nearly – tame, she had remained *Chaikassia*. Everything else had gone, or was in retreat. Not that.

Because of this, he was finding it easy to talk to her, and would find it easy to perform the interview. And he wondered if others had found this too. He even wondered if that had been the problem for the one who left under the care of paramedics – it had been, for him, *too* easy.

At the nineteenth hour, when the moon was at the top of the first window and crossing to the top of the second, someone came in to check on them.

They had been talking about two and a half hours.

Verbally, they had crossed vast tracts of land, lingered in crypts and on high towers, seen armies gleam and sink, and sunrise slit the edge of air like a knife. And she had been, through memory, a child, a girl, a woman.

She had spoken of much of her life, even of her childhood, of which, until now, he had known little. A vampire's childhood, unrevealed in her book, or in any other medium. He had even been able to glimpse her own adolescence, where she stood for him, frosted like the finest glass with candle-shine and ghostly falling snow.

As the door was knocked on, this contemporary and unforgivable door, in such an old-fashioned and fake way, *Chaikassia* threw back her head and laughed.

"They must come in. To see whether I have attacked you."

He knew quite well that there were three concealed cameras in the room, perhaps for her protection as much as his. He suspected she knew about these cameras too.

But he said, "They see, surely, you would never do that."

She glanced playfully at him. "But I might after all be tempted."

He said, "You're flattering me."

"Yes," she said. "But also I am telling you a fact. But again, I have given my word, and you are safe."

Then a uniformed man and woman were in the room. Both gave a brief bow to *La Vampiresse*. Then the man came over and handed her a beaker like a little silver thimble on a silver tray.

"Oh," she said, "is it time for this now?"

"Yes, Madame."

She glanced at him again. "Did you know, they make me also swallow such drugs?"

"I knew something about it."

"Here is the proof. For my health, they say. Do you not?" she added to the man. *He* smiled and stood waiting. *Chaikassia* tipped the contents of the silver thimble into her mouth. Her throat moved smoothly, used to this. "But really, it is to subdue me," she murmured softly. And then, more softly, almost lovingly, "As if it ever could."

The uniformed woman had come over and stood by his chair.

She said to him politely, "Do you wish for coffee, sir, hot tea, or a soft drink?"

"No, thank you."

"I must remind you, sir, your three hours are nearly through."

"Yes, I'm keeping count."

When they had gone out again, *Chaikassia* stood up.

"Three hours," she murmured. "Have we talked so long?"

"We have twenty-four minutes left."

"Twenty-four. So exact. Ah, monsieur, what a captain you would have made."

He too had got up, courteous, in the old style. He saw now, taken aback for a moment, that even in her high heels she was shorter than he. He had gained the impression, entering, approaching, she was about a tenth of a metre taller, for he wasn't tall.

She had always seemed tall to him, as well. Perhaps she had shrunk a little. Despite their best efforts – the diet she now lived on... like the loss of her own teeth.

"What else shall I tell you?" she asked.

"Anything, Madame. Everything you wish to."

So she began again one of her vivid rambling anecdotes. Only now and then did he require to lead her with a question, or comment. Of all the things she had already told him, many he recognized from the other material. Yet others had proved changeable, or quite fresh, like the childhood scenes, different and new. He was aware, they alone might make a book. The tape chugged on over his heart, a full four hours of it, to be on the safe side, its clever receptor catching every nuance, even when, for a moment, she might turn her head. And he marvelled at her coherence. So much and all so perfectly rendered. If she repeated herself, he barely noticed. It didn't matter. This was a reality more real than anything else, surely? More impactful and apposite than any tragedy which was human.

"Look at the moon," she suddenly said. "How arid and cold and old she is tonight." Her voice altered. "Have they told you? I'm always better when the moon's up. When it's full. I wonder why the hell that is? Crazy, isn't it?"

And something in him stumbled, as it seemed something had done in her. For not only the pattern of her speech had altered, the faint accent wiped away, but as she looked back at him her face was fallen and stricken. And from her eyes ran out two thin shining tears. Lost tears, all alone.

Made dumb, he stood there, seeing her oldness and her shrunkenness. Then he heard his voice come from him, and for a second was afraid of what it would say.

"Madame *Chaikassia*, how you must miss your freedom, it must be so intense, the lonely sorrow of all these hundreds of years you have lived – and you are the last of your kind. You must feel the moon is your only friend at last, the only thing that can comprehend you."

And then her face – was smoothing over, the strength of imagination working its power upon her. The trite banality of his words, like some splash of bad dialogue from the worst of the scripts, but able to change her, give her back her courage and her centre. So that again she rose, towering over him, her eyes wiser than a thousand nights, older than a million moons.

"You are a poet, monsieur. And you are perceptive. Come to the window. Do you see – the bars are of finest steel, otherwise, they think, my captors, I will escape them. But

they have forgotten – oh, shall I tell you my secret?”

They leaned together by the cold glass, observing the slender bars.

She said, “Unlike most of my kind, I am able to make myself visible, monsieur, in mirrors – have they ever told you? Oh, yes, an old trick. How else was I able for so long to deceive your race and live among you? But there is, through this, a reverse ability. I can pass through glass. Through *this* glass, through these *bars*. I do go out, therefore, into the vastness of the night. But I am then invisible. I see you believe me.”

“Yes, Madame Chaikassia. Many of us have long thought this was what you must be doing.”

She leaned back from him, triumphant, and laughed sharply again. He caught the faint antiseptic tang of the drug on her breath, the drug they gave her to “subdue” her.

“I fly by night. And though I return then to this prison-cage – one night, one night when I am ready – believe me, *I shall be gone for ever.*”

Her eyes glittered back the stars.

He knew what to do. He took her hand, and brushed the air above it with his lips.

“I’m so glad, so very glad, Madame, you are no longer shut in. I salute your intrepid spirit, and your freedom.”

“You will tell no one.” Not a plea, an order. (Yes, she had now forgotten the cameras.)

“I *swear* I will tell no one.”

“Nor when you print your story-piece about me.”

“Nor even then. Of *course* not then.”

Flirtatiously she said, “You are afraid I will kill you otherwise?”

“Madame,” he said, “you could kill me, I’m well aware, at any instant. But you’ve given your word and will not. Now I have given *my* word, and your secret is secure with me, to my grave.”

He found his eyes had filled, as hers had, with tears. This would embarrass him later, but at the time it had been, maybe, necessary.

She saw his emotion. Still smiling, she turned from him and walked away across the room, and up the steps to her gallery of books. She did this with the sublime indifference of her superior state, dismissing him, now and utterly, for all her unfathomable length of time, in which he had only been one tiny dot.

So he went to the door and pressed the button, but it opened at once, because the cameras had shown the interview was over.

A copy of the piece he wrote – less story or interview than article – would be sent to her, apparently. She had stipulated this as part of the deal.

And so had he. He had made sure, too, the copy she received, which would be only one of three, one for her, one for himself, and one for the archive, was exactly and precisely right. Which meant that it stayed faithful to the flawless lie she was now living.

He didn’t want her or intend her ever to see the real article, the commissioned one. Nobody wanted her to see that. But that one was the one the public would see. Christ, he would cut his throat if she ever saw *that* one – well, per-

haps not go so far as cutting his throat... But he had made absolutely certain. The truth was the truth, but he’d never grasped why truth always had to be used to hurt someone. To her, life had done enough. And death would do the rest.

So in his version of the article which Chaikassia would later receive and glance over in her great room, in the tall building in the cold, moon-bled desert, an article complete with a most beautiful photograph of her, taken some twenty years before, she would see, if she looked, only what she might expect from one devoted, loyal and bound by her magical spell. But that was not what the rest of them would read, marvelling and sneering, or simply turned to stone by fear at the tricks destiny or God could play.

But the real article would anyway make little stir. It wasn’t even going to be very lucrative for him, since the travel expenses had been so high. And it was of interest only to certain cliques and cults and elderly admirers, and to himself, of course, which was why he had agreed to write it, providing he could interview her, by which he had meant meet her, look at her, be with her those three hours.

The photograph used in the real article was chosen by his editor. It was very cruel. It showed her as she had become – not even, he thought, as she had appeared to *him*. But perhaps some of them, with imaginative muscles, would still see something in it of who she was, had been. Was, *was*. This phantom of his adolescence, who would now be the haunting of his dying middle-age.

Who remembers Pella Blai?

She was once said to be one of the most beautiful women in the world or, at least, on TV. She had the eponymous rôle in that fantasy series of the previous century, *La Vampiresse*.

The storylines of the series were gorgeous if slender. It was all about a (seemingly – somewhat) Russian vampire, located (somewhere) between the Caucasus and Siberia, though God knows where. A winter country around eighteen-something, of moonlit gardens and gravestones, and wolf-scrambled forest. And here she flew by night under the moon, gliding at first light down into her coffin, as any vampire must.

Though never at the top of the tree (not even her famous pearl-hung Christmas Tree at Bel Delores) Pella enjoyed much success, and most of us forty years and up know the name. But then the whole ethos of this kind of romantic celluloid vampirism slunk from prominence.

What she did with her between-years remains something of a mystery. And even the lady herself never now talks of them. But there is one very good reason for that.

Diagnosed in her fifties with Alzheimer’s disease, Pella lives out her final years in a luxurious private clinic somewhere south of the northern USA. It is a clinic for the rich and damned, a salutary lesson for any visitor of what fate may bring. But in the case of Pella Blai, there is one extraordinary factor.

For the strangest thing has happened. Another blow of fate – but whether savage or benign, who dare say? For Pella Blai’s disintegrating brain has by now wholly convinced her that she is not herself at all, but the heroine she played all those years back on TV, on screen, and

about whom she wrote her own novel: the one true vampire left alive on earth.

Her only memories then, and perhaps continually reinvented, concern the rôle she acted and has now come to live, Chaikassia, the eternal vampire. (And please note, that is pronounced Ch'high-kazyà.)

Bizarrely, inside this framework, she is pretty damn near perfectly coherent. It is only, they tell you, when she comes out of it, and just now and then she does, that she grows confused, distressed, forgetful and enraged. When she is Chaikassia, and that takes up around ninety percent of her time, she's word-perfect. No one seems to know why that is. But having spoken some while to her, I can confirm the fact.

Chaikassia's wants and wishes too, are all those of a vampire – let me add, a graceful and well-bred vampire. And to this end, the amenable if expensive clinic permits her to sleep in some sort of box through the day. While at meal times she is served "blood" – which is actually a concoction of fruit juice, bouillon and vitamins – the only nourishment she will knowingly take. They can even leave a decanter of malt whisky in her room. She never touches it – what decent vampire would? "For guests," she tells you, with her Russian aristocrat's grace, learnt in her earliest youth in a winter palace of the mind – her mind. Which is all so very unlike the real Pella Blai, the hard-drinking daughter of an immigrant family dragged

up somewhere in lower London, England.

Frankly, having met her only last month, I venture to say there is nothing left of that real Pella at all. Instead I talked with a being who can make herself *appear* in mirrors to deceive us all, and who passes at will out through the bars of her nocturnal windows. A being too who never takes your blood if she has promised not to, but who once, with one of the fake books from her gallery, broke the nose of a reporter who offended her.

And this being lives in a high white tower in the middle of a moon-leached desert, as far away from the rest of us as it is possible to get. And, until the last of her mind sets in oblivion and night, and finally lets her free forever, I swear to you she is without any doubt – La Vampiresse.

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Tanith Lee is one of Britain's most eminent writers of fantasy and gothic novels. Her previous stories in *Interzone* were "The Girl Who Lost Her Looks" (issue 128), "Yellow and Red" (issue 132), "Jedella Ghost" (issue 135), "The Sky-Green Blues" (issue 142) and "Where Does the Town Go at Night?" (issue 147). She lives in East Sussex.

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MUTANT POPCORN

Nick Lowe



For those contemplating their first flutter, the NASDAQ Meme Index can seem a forbidding place. Memetic stocks are still largely traded in a barter of intangibles, whose commensurability is itself the product of a consensual hallucination, in non-real spaces whose very existence is continuously updated by moment-to-moment renegotiation. And the stocks themselves are a bewildering variety of concepts, abstractions, world 3 objects, and collective delusions, some of them instantly-recognizable household names like Pokemon, Calorie Crime, Angelina Jolie Can Act, and the Seven Habits of Highly Effective Pets, while some of the penny stocks trade under inscrutable titles like Zebra Fishing, Warm Beer for the Soul, and Get the Hell Out of My Underwear.

To demystify this arcanelly postvirtual world of conceptual commodity transfer, let's look at the story of one stock that's been trading high in early zero-zero, Entheism of the Appliance. This one first started trading out of Thomas Disch's garage in 1980 as a deadpan satire called *The Brave Little Toaster*, and didn't attract much notice till it reincorporated as a rather sweet little movie in 1987, did small-classic business on video, and started putting out sequels. The turning point came when Disney picked it up, recognizing its potential as a validating meme for other areas of their product line; and its dividends crashed through the

imaginary ceiling when it turned up as the undisguised plot engine of *Toy Story 2*. As often with memetic stock transfers, there are a lot of partners involved, and one shouldn't underestimate the role of Pixar, which (as the re-release of *Luxo Jr* reminds us) built its own original investment on anthropomorphizing appliances. Nevertheless, the key idea that the human/appliance relationship is a sacred bond between souls only came with the crucial conceptual merger that produced the first *Toy Story*; and only with 2 is the franchise finally ready to cannibalize the plot and themes of *BLT* itself.

Flashback. The original *Toy Story*'s towering achievement, which must have Disney shareholders kissing the video boxes daily, was that the objects of consumption have feelings too, and that failure to consume correctly (say, by playing with toys in creative ways that violate their makers' designs) is a moral violation that breaks the sacred symmetry *parent:child :: child:toy*. And to enable converts to perform the sacrament of purchase immediately, it introduced a hugely-profitable cast of lovable merchandized character toys of toy characters, including some costly copyrighted versions of traditional public-domain toy concepts. It's this that's turned John Lasseter's baby-anglepoise animation cupboard into the most powerful money-making engine in the Disney empire, and has

allowed scary Steve Jobs to armwrestle his paymasters into putting out what was planned as, and should frankly have remained, a video-only sequel as an assault to the death on celluloid itself. (Some way to go yet, to judge from my screening, where the DLP projection system made it most of the way through the pre-titles before the sound fell over and dialogue tracks started dropping out in fascinatingly unpredictable ways, resulting in controlled-panic scampering in the projection box and reversion to the backup celluloid print.)

Present Day. *Toy Story 2* upgrades its progenitor's message to address the previously-taboo topic of appliance mortality. "I'm sorry, honey, but you know, toys don't last forever," says Andy's mom when Woody starts to come apart. "How long will it last, Woody?" asks the disillusioned Jessie as Woody discovers his own lost family of primitive cross-media merchandise, and stands poised on the brink of eternal life behind glass in a Tokyo toy museum. "Do you think Andy will take you to college, or on his honeymoon?" In the happy ending of *BLT-the-movie*, the former is exactly what does happen with the boy and his beloved old appliances. But *TS2* takes itself far more solemnly, as you'd expect from a product so much more intimately coupled to the poetics and economics of marketing. Woody's sentimental education culminates in the

lesson that “Life’s only worth living if you’re being loved by a kid,” which may well be true if you’re alive; that it’s spoken without irony is a sign of how much further the entheism of the inanimate has encroached.

For the alarming difference between *Toy Story* and 2 is that the toys-are-people-too gag is played now not for knowing irony but for straight-faced emotion, though it’s significant that gender switches flip when the blubbing starts. Jessie’s tearjerking Randy Newman song about the joy of being a little girl’s beloved fetish, only to be cruelly discarded when she grows up, is a landmark moment in modern capitalist sentimentality, excused only by being the one moment in either movie to make any attempt to address the play-experience of girls. You can see exactly why Mattel were so wary of letting Barbie in; alone of all the branded toys featured, she’s exploited and abused as a butt of feeble male satire about her bimbo personality and plastic smile, neither of which features in the slightest in real-world girls’ play with the character. (A US-born colleague remembers a ‘Nam-generation childhood when it was customary to share one Ken around six Barbies, with a covering narrative about him serving overseas when he wasn’t visiting.) For a time it looks as though Jessie’s story will end in eucatastrophe with the lost Emily turning out to be Andy’s mom. That this doesn’t happen (Jessie simply gets dumped on Andy’s conveniently-off-staged kid sister) is symptomatic of both instalments’ worrying inability to comprehend, or even show any interest in, girls and girlhood as anything other than a vague mystery that goes on in the background and the past.

As far as the fun itself flies, I can’t say I was knocked spinning by *TS2*. Like too much else these days, it’s a film of strong, well-storyboarded set pieces pasted together by very perfunctory narrative inbetweening and dusted with extremely variable jokes. As you’d expect, it trades mainly on its established characters, since these are the core of the merchandising, are by now already installed in our homes, and have themselves been heavily invested with souls and love by their human owners. The animation technology has moved on a little (visibly superior, if still unconvincingly textured and strictly short-haired, puppies), but not enough for any of the humans to come even close to usable — with the partial exception of the painstakingly-rendered Al, who like Bilbo’s toes in Bakshi’s *Lord of the Rings* seems to have consumed so much of the budget that there’s none left for anyone else. (Our chums seem supremely unfazed by the fact that the

airport terminal seems to have been overrun by grey-skinned zombies.) Nothing in the main feature comes anywhere close to the impact of the four-minute preview of Disney’s photo-real-CG Jurassic-Bambi movie *Dinosaur*, which is genuine eyepopping, jawdropping, heartstopping spectacle and looks for all the world like the Disney machine’s greatest achievement in film. Whether achievement in film is the product remains to be seen.

The proper comment on *TS2*’s metaphysics is to have *Bicentennial Man* showing at the screen next door, crammed as it is with all the lines that nobody in a *Toy Story* dares to say. “Andrew is not a person; he is a piece of property.” “You read mechanical unreliability and anthropomorphize it. It is a household appliance, and you treat it as though it is a man.” “At the end of the day, we’re talking about a machine, and you can’t invest your emotions in a machine.” Wise words for the viewer, and all refuted, of course, but it’s easier to project the illusion of heart and intelligence on to this charmingly inept big-movie reading of Asimov’s robot myths. Though Chris Columbus’s film of the capstone novelette in Asimov’s cycle draws heavily on the 1992 Silverberg novelization, it still remains sensitive to the core of Asimov’s own clumsily-told but immensely resonant fable of a robot manservant’s painfully slow progress to legal acknowledgment of his humanity, and his generations-long quest for what humans will accept as human. Despite a syrup content pretty much as high as you’d expect from a film that basically lowers Robin Williams in a bucket down a 200-year-deep treacle well, it’s extremely faithful to the spirit of the original robot cycle (I exclude the ‘80s Asimov from all this, for all the usual reasons) — even inserting a pointless, blaring presentation of the Three Laws, which are nothing to do with the film version at all.



Robin Williams as NDR 114 and Hallie Kate Eisenberg as Little Miss, aged 7, in *Bicentennial Man*

The big difference between *Toy Story 2* and this is that *Bicentennial Man* deploys its sentimentality in the service of real questions about the nature of humanity, however inept and unsatisfying the answers offered. Asimov was deft at distancing himself from any easy political reading of the robot stories as parables of American racial history, and his 1976 novelette was one of the rare exceptions, its then-topical title openly inviting an allegorical reading which the text itself still delicately resisted. Columbus — now there’s a director to shoot the story of America — manages the tricky task of delivering a film that looks for all the world as if candyfloss wouldn’t melt in its mouth, and as if it really doesn’t know what it’s really about, while remaining thumpingly obvious at every turn. The most powerful scene in the novelette, significantly deleted in the film, has Andrew innocently set out for town in his new human clothes, only to be Second Lawed to the brink of death by human rednecks a few yards up the road. Instead, everything’s couched in painfully delicate euphemism and talkaround: “If we’re ‘together’, ‘you and me’,” says Embeth Davidtz as the android’s mortal lover, “we’ll ‘never be accepted’.” *Know what I’m saying?*

One of the major problems with both story and film here is the near-total lack of social context: the insistence on treating Andrew’s story as a metaphysical one-off, rather than as paradigmatic of the plight of robot-kind at large. Asimov was largely trapped into this by the weight of earlier stories in the cycle, which had sketched out a future history in which the machine/man species barrier was not fundamentally crossed. But the consequence, both on page and on screen, is a narrative that seems to argue that civil rights are a jolly good thing provided the servants don’t all want them. Andrew is marked from the start as a candidate for citizenship by the fact that he has sensibilities above his class: he sculpts, tinkles ivories, listens to the white man’s music (opera). Indeed, it’s his very uniqueness that first gives Sam Neill the dreadful suspicion that he’s taken delivery of a domestic appliance that’s being played by Robin Williams. Even so, Andrew is only granted acceptance after he’s lived for decades in a scandalous relationship with a human partner, and only when he’s signed away his life for the privilege. In the ending of both story and film, the price of acceptance by humanity is the surrender of his immortality for a human death: “I would rather die as a man,” he says, “than live for all eternity as a machine,” which entirely ducks the question of why he

shouldn't jolly well have both.

There's a general vagueness, in fact, about the whole outside world, where *Bicentennial Man* parades two centuries of what may be the most unimaginatively imagined future in any sf epic. Asimov himself was notoriously weak at this – the original *Foundation* trilogy had its futuristic men still smoking cigarettes and women still carrying handbags – and in his original story contented himself with clumsy passing references to fashions for heavy male makeup and see-through clothing. Columbus has clearly paid money to conceptual designers to re-envisage San Francisco from 2005 to 2205, but the results are the most shocking pageant of feeble-minded clichés seen this side of a mid-century pulp cover: rocket cars, monorails, overlit white interiors, all the while the fundamentals of upper-class interior design and sartorial taste remain improbably conservative (as does the downtown building programme). Nor is there any sense of social or political changes in the external world order beyond the emergence of a "World Congress," who hold their meetings in one of those big tiered council chambers straight out of the World Congress Council Chamber mail-order catalogue.

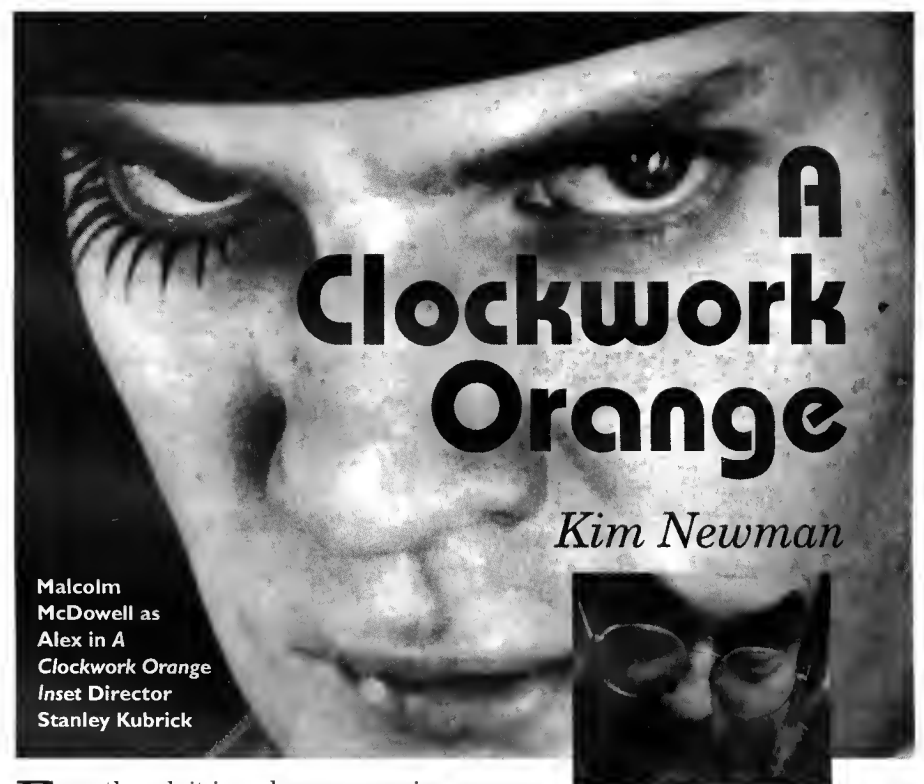
Nevertheless, *Bicentennial Man's* manifold clumsinesses and copouts can't entirely clobber what still manages to be both a thoughtful and a touching realization of Asimov's tale. Silverberg's warmer sense of the pathos of passing generations has been useful in fleshing out Asimov's cooler, legalistic arc; and Davidtz's old-lady special makeup – and, it must be admitted, her performance in it – is stunningly good, which makes it all the greater shame her actual character is so thinly written. Surprisingly, it's even one of the less dreadful Robin Williams vehicles. He's not going to win any robot Oscars (Adams, I suppose) for world's most convincing performance in a shiny exosuit; but it's impressive how effectively Williams' paintspray acting can be controlled by simply being confined in a suit of plastic armour for the first half of the film and pretending to be a machine for the second, with a script that insists on his ability to act being layered up by carefully-measured increments. "You want your thoughts and feelings to show on your face?" asks boffin Oliver Platt, rightly wary; for quite apart from the threat of letting RW loose, it's a slippery slope (about 35 minutes' screentime) from that to fitting a strap-on and letting 'em pleasure our women. Give a toy a soul and before you know it it's leg-overing your great-granddaughter. Never say we weren't warned.

None of this is to suggest that more traditional brands of metaphysics have had their day. But the value of meme stocks can go down as well as up, and this really isn't a good time of the cycle to be getting into organized religion. Most of the smart information got out of Centuries-Old Catholic Conspiracy when the millennial-armed bubble burst and Gabriel Byrne found himself available for proper movies again. Now, with its UK bow delayed to the wrong side of the apocalypse, Rupert Wainwright's flashy and vapid *Stigmata* looks like a nostalgic slice of millennial retro, with its engaging central conceit of Byrne as a Vatican Randi debunking Catholic Forteanism on the pontiff's business, only to meet his match in stigmatic hairstylist Patricia Arquette's increasingly-overdirected raptures of devotional gore.

It's the best-made, least entertaining of last year's run of Catholic fantasies: almost completely humourless, and with characters whose clonking complexities seem to have been assembled out of a couple of hands of Yellow Pages combinatorial pick-up. ("He's a priest *and* a scientist! She's a

beautician *and* a visionary! The sister-in-law's a meat-packer *and* a pet therapist! – oh, what, we decided to lose the sister-in-law?") As with the characters, wherever there's a choice between looking good and making sense the former wins wounds-down: Arquette's hairdresser salary finances a huge designerly Pittsburgh loft, and her local library seems to boast a vast borrowable section of lavishly-illustrated coffee-table tomes on temporal lobe epilepsy. It's clear enough early on that nobody had much of a clue what to do for any kind of plot or rationale, and most of the movie relies on the framework of set pieces (five wounds, five big set pieces) before giving up and nicking the ending of *The Name of the Rose* around some silly fluff about trying to suppress the Gospel of St Thomas (in which case, some will note, the conspirators haven't done a terribly good job). It's a nice try, and this time last year it might have been a hotter stock; now, the spiritual currency is all in inanimates, and Disney has never been stronger. If you've been hanging on to your soul, sell.

Nick Lowe



Even though it is no longer a *samizdat* in its own country of origin, it is hard to make sense of the status *A Clockwork Orange* attained in the early 1970s. If you went to my school and were a right bastard, it was your favourite film, though you saw the movie you imagined rather than the one Stanley Kubrick made. Thanks to the tabloid controversy that surrounded "this evil film" (often yoked

together with *Straw Dogs* and *The Devils*) and a crucial error on the part of Stanley Kubrick (he assumed his audiences were as detached and intellectual as he was), *A Clockwork Orange* was widely read as a manifesto for the bovver-boy generation. Thirty years on, it seems surreal that there were in 1972 apprentice juvenile delinquents whose knowledge of liter-

ature extended beyond Enid Blyton to only two authors, Richard Allen and Anthony Burgess.

Though I read the book in the 1970s – in the Penguin edition Kubrick adapted, which is to say it had a glossary the author didn't want included and lacked a final chapter that he did – I didn't see the film until the 1980s, at a screening which wound up causing much trouble for the Scala Cinema. It was impossible to form any opinion of the film from that experience, but I certainly came away understanding exactly why Kubrick chose to have it withdrawn in Britain. Among the audience, gathered through word of mouth, was a large-ish group of English neo-Nazis, complete with crusader-cross flags and a British bulldog, who had their den mother buy their tickets *en masse* then crept in and spent the first third of the film cheering on Alex and his droogs in the old ultra-violence, then violently rebelled against the movie as it seemed to turn on them – with Alex, whom they had read as a cool doesn't-give-a-shit rebel figure, becoming an intolerably cringing religious hypocrite in prison and crawling to the despised authorities even before brain-washing – and drowned out the rest of the picture with racist, homophobic, generally clod-like chanting. My chief memory of the evening is of a woman who later became a film producer facing down 20 or so fascists and shouting them into quaking wrecks.

The real tragedy of all this is that, as repeated later viewings have revealed, *A Clockwork Orange* is a genuinely important, thoughtful movie. Its problem is that few seem willing to engage with its project and all discussion of the picture gets wrapped up in the odd irrelevance of how closely the film wants us to identify with Alex in his (comparatively brief) rape-violence-and-robbery spree. From what you've read about the film, you'd think it was presented in a realistic, high-mimesis manner (like, say, *Romper Stomper*), but its stylization starts with Burgess's invented pidgin Russian ("nadstadt," which roughly translates as "Newspeak," to give a suggestion of his frame of reference) and continues with 2001-style slow tracks through sculpturally-perfect sets (like many Kubrick movies, the story could easily be told through the decor alone), the consistently exaggerated, grotesque performances (easily on a par with those of *Dr Strangelove*) and even the character names ("DeLarge," "Deltoid"). The

story goes that Kubrick began *Strangelove* as a serious film (it's based on a straight novel, Peter George's *Two Hours to Doom*) but found the story only made sense as a "nightmare comedy." Since then, he has always tackled the most extreme material – Stephen King's *The Shining*, Gus Hasford's *The Short-Timers* – by looking for the demented, often Neanderthal humour.

The plot is highly schematic, almost as fable-like as *The Pilgrim's Progress* or *Candide*, as Alex (Malcolm McDowell) encounters after his reprogramming all the people he met before his "cure," with those he abused abusing him, and the lesson learned that the violence he has inflicted has made monstrous all his former victims. Before the "Surprise Visit," Alexander (Patrick Magee) is the only decent man in a corrupt world, but when we see him late in the film he has become a gurning monster, toted about in his



wheelchair by Dave Prowse (who speaks with his own Bristol voice, for a change), relishing the torture with which he gets to repay his tormentor. After the laddish sexual potency Alex displays in the first act, he is repeatedly raped, metaphorically and (it is implied) actually: molested by his grinning probation officer (Aubrey Morris), anally inspected by the prison warden (Michael Bates), air-kissed by cellmates, injected in the bottom by a nurse, mind-fucked by images of violence, bent over and dunked in a horse-trough by his old droogs, and tormented with Beethoven's Ninth by the anti-government conspirators. Perhaps this was the theme that so upset the fascists at the Scala.

Made in 1971, closely based on a novel from 1962, *A Clockwork Orange* is a film which resonates across the years. Its future is quaint now, with Alexander pecking out his "subversive literature" on a giant IBM typewriter, "lovely, lovely Ludwig Van" on vinyl, and Alex stranded alone in a vast and empty National Health hospital ward, and the year of its origin is revealed by such odd items as the haircuts and the underwear. However, the world of "Municipal Flat Block 18A, Linear North" is very much with us: a vandalized housing estate, where murals are amended with obscene genitalia, passersby are rare and jobs loll about the lobbies with nothing better to do than hurt people. The government, not courageous enough to do away with democracy and wavering in its policies at the dictates of the newspapers and "public opinion," has never

seemed more like the one we have – and all the talk of "needing all our prison space for political offenders" carries a chill.

Among the specifics foreshadowed in the film are glam (eye make-up for men), punk (did Sid Vicious think of Alex when he was turned into another kind of punk in Riker's Island prison?), "care in the community" (what else is the Ludovico Treatment?), the chart success of Heaven 17 (the makers of "We Don't Need This Fascist Groove Thing" took their name from a band mentioned by the bird in the music shop), the increasing reliance on police brutality (the most horrible moment in the film is the revelation that Alex's droogs have left school and become coppers), the effects of violent cinema on its audiences ("a very good professional piece of cine, like it was done in Hollywood"; the layer of ironies here is just too intricate to unpick) and the crass commodification of classical music (why buy the whole symphony when you can get a CD that with just the passages used in ads?).

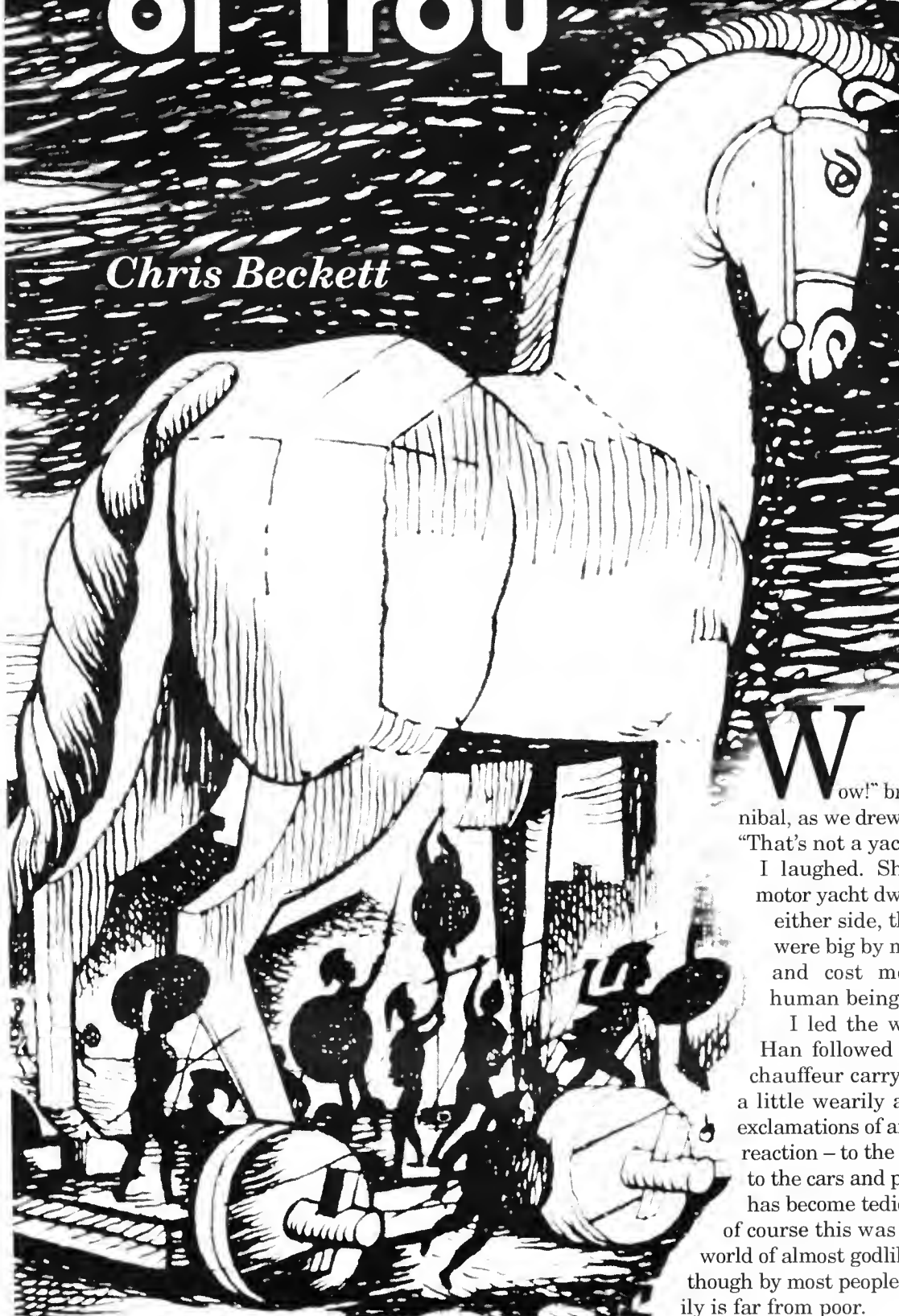
At the heart of the film is a debate about definitions of good and evil that is in danger of seeming too pat. However, the prison chaplain (Godfrey Quigley) who protests that Alex has not been persuaded to become good but merely bludgeoned into not being bad, delivering the "message" of the text, is as sit-com hysterical as any of the other authority figures – the Probation Officer, the Chief Warden, the Minister of the Interior (Anthony Sharp), Dr Brodsky (Carl Duerling), the blue-haired psychiatrist (Madge Ryan) – we see in the film. It may even be that Kubrick foresaw the misappropriation and misreading of his film, for he imagines such a process in the sequences where Alex cosies up to the chaplain by reading the Bible, only to use it as a kind of pornography by projecting his fantasies (flogging Christ, an orgy with handmaidens) into the stories. The use of vampire imagery in one fantasy sequence (which also includes a snippet from *One Million Years BC*) and Nazi footage in the treatment scenes suggests the breadth of history and pop culture encompassed here. In the end, this is an essential film but – obviously – not for everybody. The only real way to come to grips with what Kubrick is trying to do is to watch it on a double bill with its companion piece (the plot is virtually identical), another misunderstood masterpiece, *Barry Lyndon*.

Kim Newman

A Clockwork Orange is showing at the National Film Theatre on 29 and 30 April 2000.

The Gates of Troy

Chris Beckett



Wow!" breathed my friend Hannibal, as we drew up beside the Croesus. "That's not a yacht, it's a bloody ship!"

I laughed. Shiny and sleek, Dad's motor yacht dwarfed the boats moored either side, though they themselves were big by most people's reckoning, and cost more than an average human being earns in a lifetime.

I led the way up the gangplank. Han followed (and behind Han, the chauffeur carrying our bags.) I smiled a little wearily as Han let out various exclamations of amazement. This kind of reaction – to the Croesus, to the houses, to the cars and planes and helicopters – has become tedious over the years. But of course this was a new world to Han, a world of almost godlike, Olympian opulence, though by most people's reckoning Han's family is far from poor.

For myself, when I look at the Croesus, I feel oppressed by the scale and flamboyance of the thing, as if it required of me that I too should be extravagant and larger than life, like Dad.

“Mehmet!” I called.

Wiry, white-haired, leathery with sun, the Croesus’ faithful crewman emerged smiling from within. His whole working life has been given over to the care of the Croesus and its four predecessors, and to my father, who he adores.

“Master Alex! How nice to see you, sir. You have finished at school now, I understand?”

“Nice to see you too Mehmet,” (The chauffeur put down the bags and disappeared). “This is my school friend Hannibal. Yes, school’s out for good. It feels great!”

Actually it felt very frightening, but one didn’t say that.

“Well, we are ready to leave as soon as you want.”

“Great. We’ll just settle in, and then let’s be off.”

“That was *extraordinary!*” enthused Han as I showed him his cabin.

“What was?”

“You just had a conversation in, what, Turkish?”

“Albanian actually.” I sighed. “I’m sure I told you about my language splice didn’t I?”

“I guess I didn’t quite...”

The fact was that I hadn’t had a conversation in Albanian at all. I had had a conversation in English. The language splice intercepted what Mehmet said in Albanian while it was still a signal in my auditory nerves and translated it for me. I replied in English, but the splice again intercepted the nerve signals going to my vocal cords and substituted the Albanian which actually came out of my mouth. The thing did this fluently with several hundred languages, and – because it knew examples of every language family from Indo-European to Uto-Aztecan – it would have a competent stab at any language at all, learning a new one properly in a day or two.

So when I listened, I only ever heard English. I could hear other languages as background noise, but as soon as I paid attention, they turned into English. It was my father’s answer to my expressing an interest in studying languages at University.

“Waste of time, Alex, a complete waste of time. No one needs to study languages now.”

My objections were dismissed as mere funk and the splice was put in under a local anaesthetic.

It was the same with history when I expressed an interest in that. Ask me a question about history, any question at all! The President of Latvia in 1988? Gorbunov. The death of Constantine the Great? 337 C.E. You see I don’t even have to think about it.

A pity really.

An hour later I was steering the Croesus out to sea through a white forest of sailing yachts, tactfully assisted by Mehmet. Han had a go too when we were out in open water. Then we let Mehmet take over.

He headed for Corsica. We wandered up to the fore deck, stripped down to swimming trunks, opened some beers, rolled up the first of many joints and congratulated

ourselves on being free.

Giving me the use of the Croesus for the summer was Dad’s leaving-school present.

“Go where you like, take who you like. Have an adventure on me!” he’d said.

I know exactly what he had in mind: me and two or three red-blooded scions of the billionaire classes taking the Mediterranean watering holes by storm, seducing beautiful young women, shinning up drain-pipes, getting into scrapes. His disappointment was obvious when I chose as my sole companion a mere doctor’s son, tongue-tied with awe in his presence, who’d only started at my school a couple of terms previously.

“At least reassure me you two are not a pair of fags,” he grumbled.

“No, we’re not!” I exclaimed, reddening.

But in fact there was a little of that in the air.

We had a division of labour. Mehmet navigated, refuelled, negotiated with harbourmasters, cooked, maintained the toilets, did the shopping and sluiced down the deck. Han and I took the odd turn at the wheel.

We went from Corsica to Sardinia, on to Sicily and Crete, and then north to meander between the Aegean islands. Sometimes we anchored off beaches and had a swim, or went ashore and explored the prettier towns. We avoided the big marinas and the gathering places of the rich. We made no serious attempt to meet people. And we talked a lot, Han and I, often about the lives that lay ahead of us and all the constraints and difficulties that put our dreams outside our reach.

“I’m going to medical school because that’s always been the case,” Han said. “My dad scraped and struggled his way into medical school from the gutters of Beirut. He’d prepared a niche for his son before his son was even born, and it hasn’t occurred to him for one second to wonder whether his son might have plans of his own. Actually I hate sick people and the sight of blood makes me throw up.”

“Tell me about it! With me it’s like every time I express an interest in anything Dad gets it for me, instantly. So it ceases to be an aspiration, ceases to be something to aim for. People think I’m being indulged, but actually I’m being fobbed off...”

And so on. We laughed a lot and touched each other a lot in what was ostensibly a brotherly horsing-around sort of way. But sometimes the eye contact lingered and was hard to break. I found myself noticing how good-looking Hannibal was with those dark Levantine eyes and how close we were, and he was clearly thinking similar sorts of things. He even tried to speak about it.

“You know Alex, you really are the only real friend I’ve ever had in my life. I feel I can talk to you about...”

But there was a boundary still and I drew back when he seemed to draw too close to it.

“It’s this puff mate. It’s good stuff. It makes everything seem like a revelation.”

We were a bit in love with each other, but homosexuality was not a territory where I would feel at home.

Mehmet kept carefully out of our way.

We were off the Aegean coast of Turkey, moving towards the Dardanelles, when the helicopter appeared in the distance.

"Looks like one of Dad's," I observed idly and began rolling another joint.

When Han passed the joint back to me to finish it off, I looked round again at the helicopter which was much nearer now: nearly overhead.

"Jesus, it *is* Dad's!" I exclaimed, leaping convulsively to my feet and tossing the remains of the joint guiltily into the sea.

Han laughed disbelievingly. But then the helicopter was hovering overhead, a door was opening and a figure was being winched down towards us.

"It's your father, Master Alex!" exclaimed Mehmet, rushing excitedly up on deck after speaking to the helicopter on the radio.

I was less enchanted.

"What the fuck does he think he's doing!"

And then there was Dad on the fore deck, unbuckling his harness: big, bronzed, beaming, radiant with energy and health.

"I thought I'd pay you boys a visit!"

Mehmet, who worships Dad, rushed forward and so did well brought-up Han, but my father held up a restraining hand.

"Just a minute. I've got a little surprise for you!"

The winch cable had gone up and now came down again with a large oblong package in a sling.

We helped to remove it. At a wave from Dad, the winch went up again and the helicopter left.

"Right then," my father said, "now I need a drink."

Mehmet hurried to oblige and we went down to the back of the yacht to sit in the shade of the canopy.

"So what have you been up to?" Dad asked.

Han, all stumbling and deferential and addressing him as "sir", began to describe our route so far in boring detail. I interrupted to tell Dad about the highlights: the school of dolphins off the coast of Malta, the sunset over a tiny Sardinian cove, the octopus speared by a fisherman in Crete, its tentacles pulling and tugging at his trident like a child being tickled trying to pull the big fingers away... I knew Dad wouldn't be interested. I knew his eyes would glaze over in a matter of seconds. But he'd asked the question and I was damned if I was going to let him get away without waiting for me to answer.

"Nothing much then," was how he summed up when I'd finished. "That's what I thought. Well, I knew you could do with a bit of excitement so I brought you this."

He indicated the mysterious oblong, still wrapped in the canvas bag it had worn in the sling, then he called out to Mehmet.

"Mehmet, old friend, you come and look at this too. It's the future of yachting!"

Incidentally, he spoke to Mehmet in English and Mehmet spoke English in reply. Dad always spoke English. (If absolutely necessary he carried a pocket translator). I once asked him why he hadn't had a language splice put in like me, if he thought they were such a good idea.

"Over the hill, I'm afraid, Al. The docs tell me it's a bad move at my age. If splice technology had been around

when I was younger I would have gone for it like a shot."

But I doubt that very much. I can't imagine my father accepting anything inside his head that was made by another human being. He is, as they say, a self-made man.

Anyway. The package.

Even when it was out of its bag, we were none the wiser. It was a white rectangular object with a set of controls and a display panel located roughly in the middle. There was also a suitcase-shaped box stuffed in with it into the canvas bag.

Dad was delighted by our expressions of incomprehension.

"No idea?" he asked. "Well, you'll certainly never guess. It's a temporal navigator, no less. A time machine!"

We all gasped. There are, after all, only a few such things in the world.

"That's worth more than the GNP of a medium sized country," exclaimed Han in a breathless semi-whisper, when my father had gone for piss. "And your Dad calmly lowers it from a helicopter onto a boat!"

I was irritated by his star-struck awe. He knew my feelings about my father. He'd listened, he'd sympathized. But when it came to it, he was just as gibbering and servile as everyone else in my father's actual presence, seduced by his wealth and fame, and by the child-like egocentrism that came with it.

"Now I defy you to have a boring time with *this*, Alex," Dad said, settling back into his chair. "The Roman Empire. The Ancient Egyptians. Moses. You can go back 5,000 years if you want to!"

"That's wonderful, sir," Han gushed, "I just can't get it through my head that this is a real temporal navigator. I mean you hear about these things but you don't expect to actually go back in time yourself. Wow! Unbelievable!"

He cast around for intelligent questions.

"I've... I've never quite gathered why people always use these at sea?"

"Because when you travel back you take a few hundred tonnes of the surrounding matter with you," Dad said, "Not too awkward if it's just water, but rather difficult on land. And on land you'd run rather a risk of materializing slap in the middle of a building or something."

"But isn't the planet in a different position anyway? I mean what with rotation and going round the sun and the sun itself, you know, going round the galaxy..."

Dad shrugged vaguely and looked away, as he did when irritated by pettifogging details.

"They say it is the ultimate yachting accessory," murmured Mehmet, who had taken delivery of many expensive yachting gizmos over the years, and acquired prestige as a result among the little fraternity of motor yacht chauffeurs.

But my father, always impatient with chat, was unpacking the box that came with the time machine.

"A few bits and pieces here in case there's any trouble. These little torch things give out blinding coloured light and make a deafening sound. Here's a couple of laser guns. These cylinder things here, they're small force shields. You strap them on your belt. If things get hairy you press this

button and it sets up a protective field around you. There are modern weapons that could get through it but I'm assured that arrows, bullets and spears don't have a chance."

Han turned back to the time machine.

"How on earth does it work?" he wondered.

"No idea, but then I've never understood how a TV set works either," shrugged my father, the owner of the planet's largest broadcasting company and its second largest electronics manufacturer. "That's for the boffins. The important thing is how you use it!"

"So where are we going to go?" asked Dad, later that evening, after a meal under the stars, moored off a Turkish beach. "What are the big events in this part of the world? You tell us Alex, you're the one with the history splice!"

I felt hijacked. That was what I wanted to say. I'd been quite happy just wandering around the blue sea in the two dimensions of horizontal space, and letting my imagination do the rest. I didn't need this time travel gimmick. It was like someone barging in with a house-sized chocolate cake, a stripper and a brass band when you are enjoying a candle-lit dinner for two.

But I recognized I was in a minority of one on this, so I moderated my lack of enthusiasm and confined myself to merely putting a damper on the proceedings.

"You know," I said, "people always want to go back to the big showy set pieces: the crucifixion, or the sack of Jerusalem, or the fall of Troy or something. But that isn't really what history is all about. Those are just the earthquakes, the very occasional explosions when the tensions build up and have to be released. Almost all of history is really just people going about their daily lives. If I'm going to go back in time I'd rather just visit some ordinary little place and see what ordinary life was like for them."

Dad gave an outraged roar.

"Of all the prissy, priggish *rubbish!* What utter *nonsense!* Come on now, Alex, you mentioned Troy, isn't that somewhere round here? That'd be something! We'll go back to the sack of Troy."

"Troy! Wow!" breathed Han. "Think of that Alex!"

"That's the spirit, Hannibal!" Dad exclaimed, and turned to me. "I thought this guy was a drip when you first brought him home, Alex, I make no bones about it. But it looks like he's got more spirit than you have."

Early next morning we were opposite Troy. There would have been something quite magical about it: a sea as smooth as glass, islands in the hazy distance, the Aegean coast stretching away south, the mouth of the Dardanelles.... everything very still and softly luminous. And, in the distance, across a pale plain of wheat and poppy flowers, Hisarlik, a small hill, or really just a mound, which you would hardly notice at all if you didn't know that it was the site of nine cities, each built on the ruins of the last, spanning a period of 4,000 years from the Bronze age to the early Christian Era.

I would have enjoyed a morning just soaking all that in. But Dad as ever was busy, busy, busy.

"Right then, gun, torch and force shield each, but we can sort that out later. Mehmet, we need to prepare the Croesus for quite a jolt. Now let's figure out how to use this thing. Alex, you're the history expert. Tell us what date to aim for."

"1242 B.C.?" I said, using that strange numb kind of knowledge that comes with a splice. (You can't feel it. It isn't part of you. It isn't woven together with other knowledge to become part of your intuitions and dreams. But when you look for it, suddenly it is there, and your own mouth is speaking it.) "Until about 20 years ago, no one could have given an exact date and there were serious doubts as to whether there was any historical basis to the Homeric story at all. But, following the discovery of molecular memory..."

"1242 B.C.?" Dad, Mehmet and Han were all squatting round the time machine like little boys, trying to work out how to operate the controls and interpret the colourful displays.

"Right," my father commanded. "Take a seat and hold on tight."

Mehmet muttered something that ended with "Allah."

There was a spine-jolting crack, as if the boat had dropped from several metres up in the air, and then a sudden temperature drop and a few seconds of violent rocking.

I had closed my eyes like I always do on things like rides at fairs, and now I cautiously opened them.

It was evening. Eerily spot-lit by the sun setting behind us, the landscape opposite was recognizably the same as before, and yet it was totally *other* in a way that sent goosebumps up and down my spine. The plain was brown and scorched where it had been green. There were no houses, but on the hill of Hisarlik, which had been no more than a sort of stump, there stood a wondrous structure gleaming in the sun. It was the still unvanquished Troy, its high walls faced from top to bottom with shining tiles, its mighty gates of bronze blazing with solar fire.

Little groans of awe came from the others. Even my father was silent as we struggled to take this experience in.

"Look," said Han, "the Greek camp!"

We followed his gaze northwards to a dark city of tents and bonfires at the edge of the plain, with boats moored alongside. And then, almost simultaneously, we all exclaimed "The Horse!"

It wasn't just a story! There it was, towering over the camp, lit by bonfires and the setting sun.

We left Mehmet in charge of the Croesus. We all had mobiles and Dad instructed Mehmet to go back to our own era and get help if at any point he lost touch with us. (Dad was confident that the Croesus' own formidable array of security devices would be more than a match for any surprise attack on the yacht itself). Then Dad, Han and myself went ashore in the tender, heading for the Greek camp.

What happened in the next few hours was so bizarre, so far beyond anything in my experience that much of it has become an incoherent and unreliable jumble, like scenes from early childhood, which I suppose is also a time when human beings find themselves in a strange

and unfamiliar world.

I remember the camp stank of shit and ash and rotting meat. I remember heads on poles, some rotted to the bone, others still with skin and hair and eye sockets heaving with flies. I remember scrawny dogs and scrawny chickens and dirty little feral children. I remember captives tethered to wooden stakes, listless, fly-encrusted, some of them blinded or with severed limbs. I also seem to remember bits of ghost trains and stacked sections of dodgems and waltzers. But I suppose that's because the whole place reminded me of a fairground being dismantled after the fair is over. Everything was being taken down, stacked, loaded into the little wooden boats that lined the shore.

The Greeks had of course seen the Croesus appear in the distance, and observed our approach. We were surrounded as soon as we landed by hard, skinny little men with jagged bronze spears. I think they intended to skewer us there and then. Han and I had our fingers on the button of our force shields. Han's face was white as a corpse and probably mine was too, but Dad, who seemed to be enjoying himself enormously, switched his torch on to give a five-second blast of artificial lightning and ear-splitting artificial thunder. All the Greeks screamed and ran for their lives except for a single one, taller and fairer than the others, who stubbornly stood his ground. He was a member of the ruling class it seemed, in Homeric terms a "king", though probably the king of no more than some impoverished mountain village somewhere, or some tiny island.

"Who are you and why are you upheaved on the rim of the drinking vessel?" he demanded.

My splice could handle modern Greek, new testament Greek and Homeric Greek, but it struggled for a while before it mastered a Greek from times so ancient that even in Homer's day they were the stuff of legend. My father's translator clearly couldn't handle it at all because he poked irritably at the thing a few times, shook it and then, utterly characteristically, tossed it away with a gesture of impatience and contempt.

"Tell him we come from another world, Alex. Tell him we know about the horse and we know it's going to work because we can see the future."

I repeated this and the man seemed to understand at least enough of whatever it was that came out of my mouth to look surprised and alarmed when I said the bit about the horse. I suppose it wasn't meant to be common knowledge.

"Come with me. I will herd you to the nipple of the pine tree," he told me.

The other Greeks had started creeping cautiously back. One was poking gingerly with his spear at Dad's discarded translator.

We followed, Dad impatiently badgering me for information so that he could stay in control.

"What did he say, Alex? Where are we going? Tell him we want to go in the horse."

But I bided my time, enjoying the experience – even in this context – of my father being dependent on me. A short while later were in the presence of a group of bearded and grim-looking patriarchs, sitting on rugs and being fussed over by semi-naked slave-boys and slave-girls.

"Tell them you and Hannibal want to be in the horse."

"Me and Han? What about you?"

"No, no. This is your adventure Alex."

I shrugged, affecting an indifference which I certainly did not feel, and made the request as asked to the assembled Achaean dignitaries.

There was a lot of head-shaking and doubtful drawing in of breath.

"Tell him you have great powers," Dad said.

So I did, and we demonstrated for them the torches, the laser guns and the force shields. They were impressed, especially by the torch. They were much too dignified and aristocratic to run, but the fake thunder made them first go grey and stiff and then explode into a babble of animated debate. How they wished they could own such a thing! (Oddly the force shields interested them rather less, and one of them even claimed to have possessed such a thing himself since babyhood).

"Tell them they can have my torch if they let you and Han go in the horse," Dad said.

"How do you know I want to go in the damn horse?" I demanded.

But Han said, "Come on Alex, the *Trojan Horse*, for God's sake!"

So I passed on Dad's offer to the senior king. His eyes lit up with excitement like a little boy and he agreed to the deal at once, reaching out greedily for the toy to be placed into his hands at once.

We phoned Mehmet and told him what we'd arranged.

The time in the horse was hell. Thirty-six hours in a baking windowless box stinking of sweat and halitosis and, increasingly as the time went by, of the urine that soaked into the layers of leather and wool which had been packed in to stop tell-tale drips from appearing underneath the horse. There was nothing to eat but strips of stinking dried fish and nothing to drink but mouthfuls of water that tasted as if it had been scooped from a ditch. While we waited for the Trojans, I had the whispered conversations of the Greeks to regale me as they discussed the booty they would capture, the cruelties they would inflict, the destruction they would unleash and the lip-smacking smorgasbord of rape that lay before them.

"Little girls," one of them said, "really little girls. They're lovely and tight and you don't have to work so hard to hold them down."

"This is long ago," I kept reminding myself. "All these people were dead and buried and forgotten a thousand years before Christ."

Then the Trojans came and we had to remain silent for hours in the hottest part of the day, waiting for the horse to move. And then came hours of jolting about as we were dragged slowly across the plain and into the city. And then at last, as night fell, silence returned outside.

At last the time came. Our leader, an especially grim and dour-looking man named Uxos, opened a hatch. Then he and two others dropped down into the darkness below. We heard faint choking sounds and when finally Han and I lowered ourselves down, there were three Trojans lying there in black pools of their own blood.

"This isn't happening now," I told myself again, "this

is 3,000 years ago.”

The relief of emerging into the cool night air was so immense in any case that I could have tolerated almost anything.

“Right,” said Uxos, “you two strangers come with me and Achios to the gates.”

The rest of the Greeks dispersed through the town.

I hadn’t anticipated Troy would be so beautiful. Softly lit by lamps, the deserted streets were lined with big graceful, well-constructed houses, decorated with carved designs of people and animals and gods which had been picked out in coloured paints or sometimes in gold leaf. There were little gardens and pools with stone benches beside them under trees. There were statues and little shrines

As Han and I followed Uxos and Achios, his young sidekick, I thought of the Trojans sleeping behind these walls, grandparents, children, babies, peacefully sleeping and not knowing that this would be the last hour of peace in their lives. I imagined an old man snoring beside his arthritic wife, a woman returning a sleeping baby to a cot, a little girl with her arm around a worn old doll, wriggling into a more comfortable position...

“This is all long ago,” I again tried to reassure myself.

But I was not much comforted. And I thought of the dirty little soldiers gathering outside the walls with their jagged blades and their lewd and murderous dreams.

Han, meanwhile, seemed to be in a different mental universe.

“This is so brilliant, Alex!” he whispered. “I keep telling myself over and over that we’re really here! We’re in the legend! We were in the wooden horse itself!”

Being really there was what he said excited him, but he *wasn’t* really there. It was all just some sort of fancy VR game to him. Actuality itself was just a particularly brilliant graphics package.

But then, not having a splice, he hadn’t heard what the soldiers were saying inside the horse.

Another unexpected thing about Troy was that it was very small. We were soon facing the city wall and the enormous bronze gates, where a single Trojan soldier stood on duty in a small square lined with trees. The Trojans had never expected an attack from inside. And yesterday they’d seen the Greeks apparently sailing away, leaving nothing behind them but their midden heaps and their strange wooden horse. So they weren’t really expecting an attack at all.

Uxos beckoned to Han and me to keep down while he and his lieutenant crept up to the gates, Achios going to the right and Uxos going to the left.

They had it all worked out. Dissolving into the darkness under the trees, Achios emerged right in front of the sleepy sentry and softly called out to him. The man jumped slightly then peered into the darkness to see who it was. But before he could say or do anything else, Uxos had run silently out from the trees behind him, pulled back his head with a hand over his mouth, and dragged a blade across his throat.

As Uxos let him fall, Achios was already climbing up onto the lower of the two great bars that held the gates

closed and was reaching up to push at the higher one. Uxos ran to join him and very quickly they had worked it loose and slid it back. Then they jumped down and heaved together at the lower bar.

As it came free, Hannibal leapt to his feet and punched his fist into the air with a triumphant, puerile “Yes!”

I couldn’t bear to look at his face.

There was a shout from the top of the wall. A sentry up there had finally realized that something was going on. But it was far too late. The gates were swinging open. (Hannibal ran to give them a hand.) Outside in the darkness, one firebrand after another was bursting into flames to reveal the hungry, leering faces of the Greeks.

They all let out a cheer.

And there, right up in front, cheering with the rest of them, was none other than my Dad, like a banal, benevolent giant, his whole face lit up by boyish delight.

We didn’t actually participate in the rape and pillage. As the Greeks streamed shrieking in, Dad fell back. Han and I joined him and we went back to the tender and rejoined Mehmet on the Croesus.

Dawn was breaking over the plundered city as we settled in our seats to return to our own time. Smoke was pouring into the sky from within those immaculate porcelain walls, and there was a faint high sound wafting towards us over the sea. It sounded like whistling wind. It sounded like nothing of any consequence at all. But in fact it was the amalgam of hundreds of screaming voices.

Then we were back in the present, in the very moment from which we had left. There were fields of wheat and poppies and the city, that focal point of agony, was now just the peaceful and nondescript mound of Hisarlik, where nothing much more distressing had happened for hundreds of years than a tourist mislaying his camera case.

“Well!” exclaimed my dad. “That calls for a large breakfast I think. Do you think you could rustle up something, Mehmet? Plenty of cholesterol, plenty of calories and loads of strong coffee. Splendid. Now admit it boys, you don’t get an experience like that every day!”

And he phoned his people in Istanbul to send back a helicopter to lift him off. There was a TV company in Bulgaria he was hoping to acquire.

“Smoke?” said Han, as Dad finally disappeared over the horizon. “Smoke and then a long sleep, maybe?”

He got out tobacco and dope and started to roll up. We were sitting at the stern under the canopy. Mehmet was washing the fore deck, keeping as always carefully out of our way.

“So where next?” said Han, pausing before lighting up. “That was just *incredible!* Your Dad is incredible. This has been the most incredible trip of my entire life.”

“I think I’ll pass on the smoke,” I said.

“High enough already, eh?” said Han. “You’re right. I’ll save it for later. Maybe we should get some sleep and then think about where we’re going?”

“Actually I think I’ll get Mehmet to drop me off at Izmir and I’ll get a plane home.”

“Oh.” He was dismayed. “I thought we were carrying

on for another fortnight at least.”

“Yes, well, sorry. The bubble has sort of burst. You can carry on if you want. Dad seems to have left his time machine behind, so you can use that too.”

“All on my own, eh? That’ll be fun.”

“It’s up to you.”

Then Han turned on me.

“Christ, Alex, what’s the *matter* with you? Look at you, you get a luxury yacht to play with, you get a temporal navigator, you get stuff most people can only dream of. And what do you do? You get in a huff and walk away. It’s true what people say about you. You’re just plain spoiled.”

I shrugged and went to give Mehmet his instructions.

I could hardly wait to be off the Croesus and sitting on a plane back to London.

What I would do then, I still wasn’t quite sure. But I knew there *were* things I needed to do.

I’d see a doctor, for one thing, and get this splice crap taken out.

Chris Beckett, a former social worker now teaching in Cambridge, is the author of nine previous stories in *Interzone*, the most recent of which was “The Marriage of Sky and Sea” (issue 153).

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Adventures in the Ghost Trade

Liz Williams

Detective Inspector Chen brushed aside the chaos on his desk and carefully lit a single stick of crimson incense. Smoke spiralled up into the air, contributing to the brown smear that marked the ceiling like a bloodstain immediately above the desk. Chen bent his head in a brief prayer, then picked up the photograph and held it over the stream of smoke.

The girl's face appeared by degrees, manifesting out of a dark background. She was standing in the doorway of a go-down, gazing fearfully over her shoulder. Her hair was still scraped back into its funeral braids, and her white face gleamed out of the shadows like the ghost she was. Studying the photo, and the expression on the girl's face, Chen was aware of the sudden hot glow of rage in his chest. How many more young women had gone the same way after their deaths, unnoticed and unmourned? But whoever was behind all this had made a mistake this time, choosing the daughter of Singapore Three's premier industrialist rather than some nameless prostitute.

Chen held the photograph out to the woman sitting on the other side of the desk and said gently, "Do you think this might be your daughter?"

Mrs Tang's grip tightened around the handle of her Miucci handbag as she studied the photograph. In a little whispery voice she said, "Yes. Yes, that's Pearl."

"Now, you say someone sent this to you?"

"Yesterday. I didn't go out of the apartment, and no one came in. But when I walked into the living room, the photo was sitting on the bureau. In a red envelope. I didn't know what it was at first. There was a note, telling me what to do." She gestured towards the spiralling incense. "You can see her face for a little while, but then it fades again."

"And did you notice anything – strange? Apart from the envelope?"

Mrs Tang moistened dry lips. "There was some ash. I had to wipe it off the bureau before the maids or someone saw it."

"All right. Mrs Tang, I know how hard this is for you, but at least we have a lead. You must try and be hopeful."

"You will find her, won't you?"

"Don't worry. We'll find your daughter, and we'll make absolutely sure that this time she completes her journey." Chen did his best to sound reassuring.

"Thank you," Mrs Tang murmured. She pushed her expensive sunglasses to the top of her head and rubbed her eyes; they were rimmed with redness. "I'd better go. I told Hsuen I was going shopping."

Chen sighed. This was an added complication, but hardly an unfamiliar one. "Is there anything you can do to change your husband's mind?"

"I don't think so. I've tried talking to Hsuen, but he won't listen." Mrs Tang gave a brittle, bitter smile. "He says it doesn't make any difference; Pearl's dead and that's that. You see, he and Pearl were never very close. He wanted a son, and after I had her, I couldn't have any more children. So he blamed her, you see. And she was always a – well, she was a lovely, lovely girl, but she could be a little bit difficult. Wilful. She was 15, and I used to say to him 'what do you expect, these days?' They all go out with boys, and Pearl was very popular, he used to get so angry... And I think the eating problem started about then..."

Patiently, Chen listened as she talked on, building up a picture of the dead girl. At last Mrs Tang said, uncertainly, "You've been very kind, Detective Inspector. I know you'll do your best in finding Pearl. I really should go now."

Chen saw her to the door of the precinct, then made his way slowly to the drinks machine. Sergeant Ma was bending over it, thumping the side.

"Damn machine's not working again. I – oh." He stood hastily back as he saw who it was.

"Take your time," Chen said, politely.

"No no no no no. It's quite all right. It's all yours," Ma said hastily, and made a rapid exit in the direction of the canteen. With a resigned sigh, Chen managed to extract a paper cup of green tea from the machine, and carried it back to his desk. As he turned the corner, he saw that Sergeant Ma had come back and was surreptitiously waving a blessing paper over the machine. Chen was used to this, but some days his colleagues' aversion to him got him down. He sipped his tasteless tea and contemplated the photograph for a few moments longer, then collected his

jacket from the back of his chair and left the precinct.

It was only the beginning of summer, but already the heat had built to oppressive levels. Stepping out onto Jiang Mi Road was like diving into a warm bath. Chen glanced at the pollution meter on the wall of the precinct, but the results were too depressing to take seriously.

He walked slowly down towards the harbour, lost in thought. By the time he reached the edge of the typhoon shelter, the weather had grown a little cooler. There was a storm building out over the South China Sea, and the air tasted of lightning and rain. Chen smiled, picturing Inari resting her elbows on the windowsill of the houseboat, avidly waiting for the thunder to break. His wife loved storms. They reminded her of home, she said.

The ferry terminal lay a short distance along the quay, and Chen sat down on the bench to wait. Someone had left a newspaper, and he picked it up, beginning idly to read. Singapore was opening yet another franchise, this time along the Myanmar coast. Chen could remember a time when Singapore Three was the last in the franchise line; this new development would be the sixth city. Chen read on, learning that the city would be developed along the same lines as all the others, and he smiled, momentarily imagining another DI Chen sitting on an identical ferry terminal bench, several thousand miles to the south. A distant humming interrupted his thoughts and he looked up to see the wallowing shape of the ferry as it approached the terminal.

Fifteen minutes later Chen stepped off at the opposite dock and into the labyrinth of streets that constituted Zhen Shu Island. This was a rough area, and Chen walked warily, but no one bothered him. He supposed that he was anonymous enough; a middle-aged man with an unremarkable face, wearing unfashionable indigo clothes. But occasionally he would see someone start and shy away, and realize that he, or at least his profession, had been recognized. No one liked policemen, and cops who were in league with Hell were doubly unwelcome. So Chen walked unmolested through the narrow streets of Zhen Shu until he found himself standing in front of Su Lo Ling's Funeral Parlour.

Unlike the neighbouring shops, the funeral parlour was a magnificent building. The black, faux-marble façade boasted gilded columns on either side of the door, and red lanterns hung from the gable in a gaudy, tasteless display. This was not, Chen reflected, inappropriate, given the number of citizens who met their end in a similar manner. A narrow alleyway ran down one side, leading further into the labyrinth of Zhen Shu.

The sign on the door proclaimed that the funeral parlour was shut. Undeterred, Chen kept his finger on the bell until blinds twitched from the shops on either side. Over the insistent jangling of the doorbell, he could hear footsteps hastening down the hall. The door was flung open to reveal a short, stout gentleman in a long red robe.

"What do you want? This is a place of rest, not some kind of – oh." His eyes widened. Chen never knew how people could tell; it must be something behind his eyes, some inner darkness that revealed his close association with the world

beyond the world. When younger, though not usually vain, he had spent hours peering into the mirror, trying to detect what it was that made people so afraid.

"I'm sorry," the stout man said, in more conciliatory tones. "I didn't realize."

Chen displayed his badge. "Franchise police department. Precinct 13. Detective Inspector Chen. Do you mind if I come in? I'd like to ask you a few questions."

With many protestations of the honour done to the establishment, the stout man ushered Chen inside. The interior of the funeral parlour was as ostentatious as the facade. Chen was shown into a long, mirrored room with a scarlet rug. Carp floated in a wall-length tank at the far end of the room, their reflections drifting to infinity in the multiple mirrors. The stout man clapped his hands, twice, thus summoning a small wan maid.

"Tea? Green or black?"

"Green. Thank you."

"Now, Detective Inspector." The stout man settled himself into a nearby armchair. "I am Su Lo Ling, the proprietor of this establishment. What can we do to help?"

"I understand you handled the funeral arrangements for a ceremony a week ago, for a girl named Pearl Tang. The daughter of someone who needs no introduction from me."

"Indeed, indeed. So very sad. Such a young woman. Anorexia is a most tragic condition. It just goes to show," and here Mr Ling shook his head philosophically, "that not even the materially blessed among us may attain true happiness."

"How very wise. Forgive me for asking such a delicate question, but were there any – difficulties – with the funeral?"

"None whatsoever. You must understand, Detective Inspector, that we are a very old firm. The Lings have been in the funeral business since the 17th century, in Guangzhou before my father moved here. Our connections with the relevant authorities are ancient. There are never any irregularities with the paperwork." A small pause. "Might I ask why you pose such a question?"

"Your establishment does indeed possess a most honourable reputation," Chen said. "However, I fear that an irregularity – doubtless nothing to do with the manner in which the funeral was handled – has nonetheless occurred."

"Oh?" There was the faintest flicker of unease in Ling's face, which Chen noted.

"You see, it appears that the young lady in question did not in fact reach the Celestial Shores. A ghost-photograph of her has been taken, revealing her current whereabouts to be somewhere in the port area of Hell."

Ling's mouth sagged open in shock. "In Hell? But the payments were made, the sacrifices impeccably ordered... I don't understand."

"Neither does her mother."

"The poor woman must be distraught."

"She is naturally concerned that the spirit of her only child is not now reclining among the peach orchards of heaven, but currently appears to be wandering around a region best described as dubious," Chen said dryly.

"I'll show you the paperwork. I'll go and get it now."

Together, Ling and Chen pored over the documents. To Chen's experienced eyes, everything seemed to be in order: the immigration visa with the Celestial authorities, the docking fees of the ghost-boat, the license of passage across Night. He was intuitively convinced that the explanation for Pearl's manifestation in the infernal realms could be traced back to Ling, but the parlour owner's round face was a paradigm of bland concern.

"Well," Chen said at last. "This is indeed a tragedy, but I can see nothing here that is at all irregular. I realize that you operate a policy of strict confidentiality, but if you should happen to hear anything –"

"Your august ears will be the first to know," Ling assured him, and with innumerable expressions of mutual gratitude Chen departed.

He was halfway down the street when the rain began, a torrent of water that hammered the dust of the pavements into mud and plastered Chen's hair flat against his head in the first minute of its descent. Hastily, he ducked into a doorway to wait out the storm, but he had no sooner taken refuge on the step of a go-down when the door was flung open. Chen turned.

A long ebony spine whipped out and wrapped itself tightly around his ankle. Chen was thrown flat on his back and dragged through the doorway. Something tall and dark loomed over him; the hem of a stiff silk coat brushed his face like a gigantic moth. He groped frantically in his inner pocket for his rosary; finding it, he struck out with it like a flail. It connected with a bony carapace, producing a trail of sparks and the odour of scorched silk. There was a hissing curse and his ankle was abruptly released.

Struggling to his feet, Chen began to tell the rosary; speaking the Fourteen Unnameable Pronouncements in a swift, urgent voice. His assailant sprang to the far end of the room, and Chen caught the glow of a string of hot coals as the demon produced a rosary of its own. Chen had a head start, but the demon spoke in several voices at once, Pronouncements clicking and snapping from its flexible throat. Chen speeded up and beat the demon by a single syllable. There was a blast of furnace light as a crack opened up and the demon was catapulted back to Hell, leaving a noxious wisp of smoke behind it.

Wheezing, Chen stepped clear and the smoke crystallized into dust motes and fell to the floor, where it turned into a swarm of tiny red locusts that raced down the cracks in the floorboards. Chen leaned back against the wall. The rosary was red hot, but he didn't dare let go. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he limped back through the door of the go-down and out into the street, where the rosary hissed cold in the pelting rain. His ankle was swelling to alarming proportions. Cursing, Chen located his mobile and summoned transport back to the docks and the mainland.

Next morning, Chen's ankle had diminished to its normal state, although it still ached. It was lined with a ring of puncture marks; fortunately, his inoculations were up to date and minimized the effects of whatever diabolical poison the assassin had managed to inject. Despite the pain

in his leg, Chen was conscious of a quiet elation. He was on the right track. Things were getting personal. He went to the precinct early and spent some time cross-checking the franchise death register. Eight young women had died in the last four months, all of them from anorexia, all from families in the city's industrial elite. Chen printed out the list and took it downstairs.

Jian was, as usual, hunched over the computer terminal with his eyes obscured by goggles. In the dim green light of the computer room, the technician looked rather like a large, misshapen carp. Chen tapped him on the shoulder.

"Hello, Li," Jian said, without looking up. He was the most imperturbable individual that Chen had ever met; nothing seemed to faze him, not even Chen's infernal allegiances. They weren't exactly friends, but if it hadn't been for the technician, Chen would have been obliged to eat lunch on his own, every day.

"Have you got a moment? I need some help."

Jian turned. Behind the goggles, his eyes reflected strings of characters from the retinal display. "Sure. I'm just running some stuff through the mainframe, nothing crucial. What did you want done?"

"Basically, I need to cross reference some names with the records of a funeral parlour. I need to find out how many match."

"Okay, that shouldn't be a problem," Jian said. What he was about to do was strictly illegal, but Chen knew that Jian wouldn't be inclined to ask any questions. He gave Jian the name and address of the establishment, and waited for a few minutes while Jian made his way around the byzantine intricacies of the web.

"Got it. Surprisingly well protected, though... Do you want these printed off?"

"Thanks."

Chen pored over the lists, and found an immediate match of some six names. Thanking Jian, and lost in thought, he made his way back to his desk.

It was never easy, placing calls beyond the living realms. Chen waited patiently as the line hissed and crackled, and he held the receiver a short distance from his ear to avoid occasional sparks. Finally the connection came through and a small, suspicious voice said, "Yes?"

"This is Li Chen. Am I speaking to the august personage of Number Seven Hundred and One, Ruin Street?"

"Forgive, forgive," the voice said, loudly. "You have the wrong number. Goodbye."

This told Chen that his contact had company. He waited patiently for a further five minutes, when the phone rang.

"You're still there?" the voice said. "Sorry I took so long."

"No, no, only a few moments." Sometimes the time differential between Earth and the infernal regions worked to one's advantage, Chen reflected. "Listen. I need some help. With a strayed spirit."

"Oh?" the distant voice was wary. "Who might that be?"

"Her name was Pearl Tang; she died about twelve days ago. She was supposed to enter Heaven, but she went missing en route and now there's a very strong possibility that she's in your neighbourhood."

"Hell's a big place," the voice remarked.

"I think she's somewhere in the port area. I have a pho-

topograph." Chen turned it between his fingers as he spoke. "She's standing in a doorway of somewhere that looks like a go-down. There's a sign on a building nearby that reads *Miu's*." I wondered if you recognized it."

"*Miu's*," the voice repeated. "Now let me see. No, it's not remotely familiar. Never heard of it."

"Ghon Shang, you are the worst liar I have ever met," Chen said, annoyed.

The voice gave a hiss of pain. "Don't use my *name* like that."

"Well, then, don't lie to me."

"Oh, very well. There is a place called *Miu's* in the port area. It's a demon lounge. It's well known among a certain clientèle, but Madam *Miu* is apparently very discreet. I'm not surprised you've never heard of it; it only opened a year or so ago."

"A certain clientèle. What does that mean?"

"People who want – specialized services."

"What sort of people? And what sort of services?"

"Your kind of people," Ghon Shang said, with a sniff. "The living. And demons too, sometimes. As for the services – well. Sexual ones, obviously."

"Are you referring to the ghost trade?" Chen said. A thin shiver of anticipatory distaste ran down his spine.

"What else?"

Chen thought fast. The pieces of this particular puzzle – the straying spirits of a number of well-connected young women, the funeral parlour, the ghost trade – were adding up to an unpleasantly obvious conclusion. He said, "If *Miu's* place specializes in the ghost trade, then it must have a correlate here. Do you know of such a place? And what's the address of *Miu's*?"

"It's on Lo Tzu Street. As for its correlate in your city, I do not know. I have not walked in the living lands for a hundred years. And I have no plans to start now," Ghon Shang said thinly.

"Try and find out," Chen said, and hung up. Then he took a 50-dollar note of hell money from his wallet and scribbled Ghon Shang's address on it. Taking his cigarette lighter from his pocket, he set fire to the note, dropping it in the ash tray when the seagreen flame burned too close to his fingers. The ash drifted down in a fleeting spiral, winking out into nothingness as the note presumably remanifested into his informant's greedy claws.

Chen took the map transparencies from the desk drawer, shoved aside the clutter of incense coils, papers and charms from the surface of the desk, and overlaid the two maps on top of one another. Hell changed its configurations rather more often than Earth did, but there were still close correlates between the two worlds: Singapore Three on Earth, and Rhu Zhi Shur in Hell. As he had suspected, the port area of Hell overlapped with the typhoon shelters and canals of northern Fu Lung, including Zhen Shu Island. When he matched the maps carefully together, the location of *Miu's* connected with the funeral parlour. Chen picked up the phone.

Finding volunteers for the stakeout was not easy. Law enforcement between the worlds was not a high priority; policy being that since the citizens involved were usually

already dead, there was little reason to expend manpower. To Chen's secret amusement, the only officer available was Sergeant Ma. When informed of the superintendent's decision, Ma's round face became blank with dismay.

"Demons? The ghost trade? No. I won't do it."

"Look," Chen said, trying to be sympathetic. "You won't be on your own. I'll be there."

"With respect, Detective Inspector," stammered Ma, "that's part of the problem."

Eventually, via the promise of massive overtime, Ma was induced to agree. Dressed in shabby clothes, he and Chen made their way to Zhen Shu Island. Obligated to sit next to Chen on the ferry, Ma was already pale when they arrived.

"I don't think anyone's going to show up," Ma said hopefully, three hours later.

Chen gave a thin smile. "It's early yet. Another hour till midnight."

They were sitting in a teahouse opposite the funeral parlour, nursing bowls of dragon oolong. The lanterns of the funeral parlour glowed through the dusk.

"Why would anyone want to come to a place like that?"

Sergeant Ma wondered out loud.

"A funeral parlour?"

"No. You know. A demon lounge," Ma whispered.

"Don't ask me. Some people like breaking taboos."

"But such taboos..."

"They say the clients of the ghost trade are the connoisseurs," Chen murmured. "It's supposed to involve a rather subtle set of perversions."

Sergeant Ma blanched. "Who'd want to sleep with a ghost? Or a demon, even worse."

"Not all demons want suffering and pain," Chen said, trying to keep his annoyance at Ma's prejudice out of his voice. "Some of them are almost human. They have the same needs and desires, the same capacity to love –" He broke off, abruptly. "Something's happening."

A car was pulling up outside the funeral parlour: a smart black Toyota with mirrored windows. "Come on," Chen said.

Together, he and Ma stepped out of the teahouse. As they did so, Chen stumbled heavily, throwing an arm around Ma's shoulders, and leading him in a weaving line along the street. Beneath his arm, Ma's muscles were bunched into a tight knot of tension, but he went along with the drunken act nonetheless, and Chen's respect for him rose. Two men were helping a frail elderly gentleman out of the car. No one paid any attention to Ma and himself. Chen led the sergeant down an alleyway that ran along the side of the funeral parlour and stopped.

"What's going on?" hissed Ma.

"He's going in. Come on. We have to find a way in."

"What? Why would we want to do that?"

"Because I know who that old man is. Hsuen Tang. Pearl's father."

Hastily, he and Ma ran down the alleyway and found themselves at the back of the building. A high wall, topped with razorwire, separated the alley from what was apparently a courtyard. At their feet, lay the cover of a drain.

Chen looked at Ma. "Give me a hand."

Ten distasteful minutes later, they were standing in the courtyard at the back of the building. The rear end of the funeral parlour was considerably less imposing than its facade. A narrow window faced the courtyard.

Chen held up his palm. "It's guarded. Never mind –" Gritting his teeth, he took a sheathed scalpel from his pocket. Before Sergeant Ma's horrified gaze, he slashed a character across his palm, then held his bleeding hand up towards the window. The guarding spell hissed into dark steam and nothingness.

Sergeant Ma's eyes were as round as teabowls. Hoisting himself through the window, Chen landed in a narrow hallway. Checking to see that Ma was still behind him, he slipped down the corridor until they reached the door of a room which Chen estimated to be the main parlour. Muffled voices came from within.

"Wait here," Chen said. He went swiftly up the stairs and found himself before a row of doors. Each of them flickered with a quiet light and Chen felt the rosary begin to grow hot in his pocket. His skin flushed cold. Each of those doorways was an entrance into Hell. Taking the photograph of Pearl Tang from his pocket, Chen blew on it, then glazed it with a thin smear of his own blood. Balancing the photo on the palm of his hand, he placed a *feng shui* compass on top of it. The needle swung wildly for a moment, before settling in the direction of one of the doors. Pearl's spirit was here.

Cautiously, Chen held out his palm to display the still-bleeding wound and released his second spell of the night. Soundlessly, the door swung open. With the rosary wrapped tightly around his knuckles, Chen stepped forward. Even with the protection afforded by the rosary, his skin began to prickle and burn: a sure sign that the room was no longer entirely in the realm of the living. Across the room, a girl lay upon a divan. Her eyes were closed, and she was curled around herself like a cat. Her skin was as white as ash.

"Pearl?" Chen whispered.

She did not stir. As Chen reached the divan, a demon leaped through the door. It was one of the more humanoid of its kind: a pale mantis face and slick black hair, wearing a long silk coat. The coat was marred with an ugly burn, Chen noticed. They had met before. The demon's taloned fingers grasped a bloody katana. It came forward in a sudden rush; the sword raised above its head. Chen spun down, hitting the floor beneath the arc of the katana and sweeping the demon's feet from under it. He whipped the rosary across the demon's wrist, making it howl. Its curiously jointed fingers flew open, releasing the katana. Seizing the sword, Chen drew back for the final blow. But as he did so, a shadow fell across his shoulder.

"Look out!" Ma's panicky voice came from the doorway. Chen turned in time to see the ghost of Pearl Tang, a skinning knife in her hand, crouched to spring. Her pale gaze was locked on his own throat. He brought the demon's katana down upon her, splitting the spirit from head to crotch and spilling her essence out across the floor in flakes of fragrant ash. And then he turned in the direction of the demon. The being was sitting on the floor, nursing its wounded wrist, but as Chen stepped in for the kill it hastily snatched something from an inner pocket of its silk

coat. A black badge.

The demon said mildly: "Seneschal Zhu Irzh. Vice Division, Fourth District, Hell. Can I have my sword back? When you're ready, of course."

"Cigarette?" asked the demon languidly.

"No, thank you. I don't smoke." Chen was methodically winding a bandage around his injured hand. The azure lights of the police car outside spun in endless refraction from the mirrored parlour. Inside the car, Ma was still questioning Su Lo Ling.

"Too bad. Helps you relax, you know. How about you?" Courteously, the demon offered the packet of thin black cigarettes to Hsuen Tang, who still sat, head bowed in shame. "No? I'm assuming you don't smoke, either," he said to the prisoner, who favoured him with a furious glare from an eye somewhere around the level of her waist. Zhu Irzh lit the cigarette with a touch of his taloned thumb.

"She was Su Lo Ling's accomplice," the demon said, nodding in the direction of the prisoner. "In fact, Ling claims that the pimping was her idea. She used her access to her father's pharmaceutical products to dispatch her friends, knowing that most of them would be brought here for burial – it is the most respected establishment of its kind, after all. Then Su Lo falsified the visa documents so that virtuous girls bound for the Celestial Shores would end up – elsewhere. Working as ghosts in Miu's brothel, of which the parlour is a counterpart. Human customers would come here to visit the ghost girls under the guise of enquiring at the funeral parlour; people from Hell would come directly. But her dad found out, and poisoned Pearl to protect the family honour. Except that she must have found business to be twice as lucrative from the other side." He glanced across to where the prisoner was sulkily weaving herself back together again.

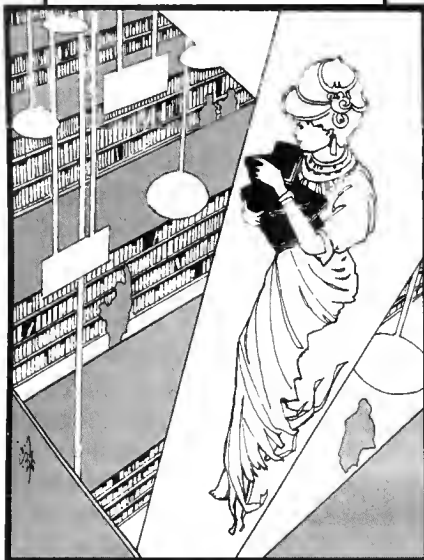
"So who sent the ghost photograph to her mother?"

"Some rival operative, maybe. Hell's a jealous place." The demon yawned, displaying sharp gilded teeth. "Sorry about assaulting you, by the way. I mistook you for one of Ling's clients; I was hoping for information. My department's billing yours for the damage to my coat."

"So what's your interest in this?" Chen asked. "Surely not the quest for law and order?"

The demon stubbed the cigarette carefully into the palm of its hand. "Imperial Majesty, no. I'm sure you know that the Seneschal forces of Hell don't work in quite the same way as the police force in your world. No, our only concern was that Pearl Tang was operating without a license, so she wasn't paying any tax. And taxes," said the demon with a beguiling smile, "are the only certainty in this life or out of it. Not even death's reliable any more."

Liz Williams's previous stories in this magazine were "A Child of the Dead" (issue 123), "The Unthinkables" (issue 151) and "Dog Years" (issue 152). She lives in Brighton.



REVIEWED

Not all fantasies – this needs to be repeated, like a spell – are thinly disguised historical romances or bad xeroxes of Tolkien. Not all fantasies burgeon with Quests and unlikely court intrigues rife with unabashed solecisms; not all fantasies inhabit floridly retrograde dreamworlds in which more of the same is a virtue, not a vice. No, it sometimes only seems that way. Some fantasies make a stab at originality. They try and say something new. They shine out like a good deed in a naughty world.

Let us praise, then, Jeffrey Ford's *The Physiognomy* (Avon, \$3.99), and its sequel, *Memoranda* (Avon, \$12), whose more or less self-contained stories share the same narrator and an ambiguous, allegorical setting in which science and magic are intermingled. They are quietly ambitious attempts to write outwards, from a particular fantasized world to truths which commingle with our own.

The Physiognomy tells of the fall from grace and redemption of Physiognomist First Class Cley, a self-important, malignant and self-deluding creature who's addicted to a powerful hallucinogenic drug, and wields the pseudo-science of the Physiognomy in service of the tyrant Master Drachton Below, judging and sentencing people on the basis of their appearance. The story falls into three sections. In the first, which feels like a burlesque Western, the kind where Clint Eastwood rides into some forsaken town to harrow its inhabitants, Cley is sent to a borderland mining town to uncover the thief of a strange fruit which has been discovered deep underground. Cley bungles the investigation, finds that the woman with whom he has fallen in love has betrayed him, and

Face Value

Paul J. McAuley

mutilates her in revenge, and is sentenced by Below to certain death in a remote sulphur mine. There, in the novel's middle passage, Cley realizes his part in the corruption and cruelty of Below's rule – for the mine is littered with the preserved bodies of those he sentenced on Below's behalf. Unexpectedly reprieved and wanting to atone for his sins, Cley returns to the Well-Built City, half Oz, half Metropolis, where Below's megalomaniacal plans, fuelled by his eating of the strange fruit (it may be the Apple of Eden), are going dangerously astray.

This sly, blackly comedic allegory about the misuse of knowledge won the World Fantasy Award; its sequel

deepens the relationship between Cley and Drachton Below, of conscience and power. Cley's new life in a rural settlement is soon disrupted when Drachton Below unleashes a sleeping plague. Cley sets off in search of an antidote and discovers that Below has accidentally infected himself. With help of a tame demon Below, Cley must plunge into his erstwhile master's mind and look for the secret of the plague's cure in Below's crumbling, haunted memory palace.

Both books are crammed with inventive and often vividly surrealistic imagery, and their gothic melancholy is resonant with echoes from Mary Shelley (Below is a very postmodern Prometheus), Mervyn Peake, Angela Carter and Gene Wolfe. Like Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun*, Ford's unnamed world is heavy with a sense of exhausted time and gestures laden with meaning from ages past; like the Torturer, Severian, Cley commits atrocities in the name of justice (but Severian's story is one of justification, and Cley's of apology); and Ford borrows Wolfe's trademark manner of ending chapters with sudden reversals of perspective, and of minting sentences – "What I had found in her was not the fulfilment of lust but the origin of love" – which open onto unexpected depths.

Cley is overshadowed by Below's cruel, capricious ebullience (we learn little of how Cley became a physiognomist, or his relationship with others in the Guild), and he is a passive rather than an aggressive hero (like Chandler's Marlowe, he gets knocked out rather a lot, as a convenient escape from trouble), but he is an original creation, both touchingly absurd and (after his education in the sulphur mine) cruelly self-knowing, prone to pratfalls yet burdened with unrequited love and a melancholic yet heroic sense of duty. *Memoranda* ends with a slingshot to a third volume. We have learned enough to put our trust in Ford's telling of that tale.



Strange Travellers (Tor, \$25.95) is flagged as Gene Wolfe's first major collection in ten years (the minor collection presumably being *Bibliomen*). Between the bookends of "Bluesberry Jam" and "Ain't You 'Most Done?," in which the same events (but not the same stories) are told and retold from two points of view, are 13 modern fairy tales: playful, allusive, ironic, crammed with riddles and transformations. In "And When They Appear," a sentient house conjures the avatars of Christmas to comfort a lonely little boy whose parents have killed themselves in the face of a civil insurrection – it's Bradbury with teeth. "Bed and Breakfast" tells of an amorous encounter between a traveller and a

woman in a boardinghouse near Hell – but who is the woman, and can the traveller trust what one of the other guests, a demon, confides to him? “The Haunted Boardinghouse” blends a ghost story and a murder mystery, and is as full of dizzy inversions as an Escher print. “Counting Cats in Zanzibar,” about a woman on the run from her husband’s creation, ends with a joke that snaps shut like a trap.

“The Ziggurat,” the longest piece in the collection, is on the surface more straightforward than its companions, but demonstrates that taking Wolfe’s stories at face value is like venturing out onto ice without first testing it: you’re liable to get in over your head before you know it. Emery Bainbridge is a competent hero in the Heinesque mould, a pragmatic engineer who thinks he knows how the world works, and a bitter misogynist. He sees his wife as a greedy and foolish shrew, thinks that women have undermined the daring by which men measure their worth, tells his son that “... women love as long as – as long as you have a good job, as long as you don’t bring home your friends, and so on.”

He’s holed up in a cabin by a lake in the depths of winter, at the end of a disastrous second marriage. The snowy woods seem haunted. His cabin is broken into and his rifle is stolen; when his wife, Jan, arrives, one of her twin daughters is kidnapped. Bainbridge rescues her from three women, fey as fairies, who do not understand English, and is wounded by his own rifle in the process; the girl claims to have been taken to a strange place shaped like a Mayan ziggurat, where time seems to pass more quickly. After Jan and the twins retreat to the nearest town, Brook, Bainbridge’s teenage son, is killed by the women. Bainbridge tracks them to their lair, discovers their true nature, and – it seems – triumphs, for by the end of the story, he has killed two of the women who murdered his son, plans to take the third as his new bride, and believes he will make a new fortune from a device stolen from the ziggurat. His triumph seems like a symbolic victory in the war between the sexes; his prospective bride a prisoner of war.

And yet.

Bainbridge’s marriage is dead; his son is dead; even the coyote he tried to befriend is dead, having eaten poisoned bait after Bainbridge accustomed it to take food from a human being. There is a sense that in his self-willed solitude he is the personification of death. The device with which he plans to revive his fortunes does nothing but disintegrate or erase that which is placed within it, and the gesture which ends the story echoes the gesture at the end of “Ain’t You ‘Most Done?”, the gesture with which the

hero surrenders to a woman who represents the fate which awaits all of us.

Wolfe’s characters must traverse or unriddle the maze of plot and signage (and, like dreams, his fiction is potently charged with slippery symbols) of the story in which they find themselves. To understand your story is to begin to understand how to survive it. Fail, and your triumphs are ashes in the mouth. Bainbridge thinks he’s a fairy-tale prince; I think Wolfe thinks he’s the wicked witch.

Steven Gould’s *Blind Waves* (Tor, \$23.95) is a near-future thriller that starts off confidently and promises much. There’s been a catastrophic rise in sea level, which has drowned all the world’s coasts and most of the cities, too, displacing billions. In the US, increasingly beleaguered by refugees from South and Central America, the Immigration and Naturalization Service is now “the second largest division of the armed forces,” busily catching illegal immigrants who yearn for the good life on the new floating cities, and incarcerating them in fortress-like prisons.

Patricia Beenan, the owner of a small underwater salvage company, is on a routine job in the drowned ruins of Houston when she discovers a recent wreck. Not only has it been sunk by the kind of ordnance mounted by INS patrol ships, but there are almost 50 bodies in the hold. Soon, Patricia and an INS investigator, Thomas Becket, are embroiled in the deadly plans of a group of white supremacists, and are also surrendering to an urgent mutual attraction.

And there’s the rub. Gould’s clear, sharp prose nicely evokes the drowned coastline and the economics and engi-

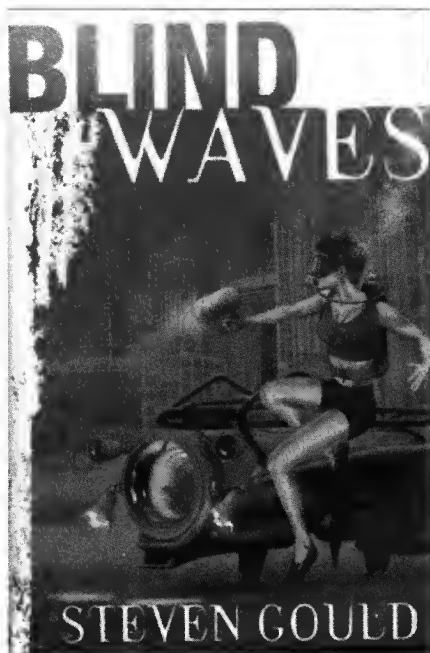
neering of the floating cities. Patricia Beenan is pragmatic, brave, and ingenious; Thomas Becket is more than her match. But the urgency of the opening scenes, with a fine depiction of a duel of wits between a small submarine and a heavily armed ship, quickly gives way to interminable pages of archly cute dialogue between the two principal characters, who quote reams of Shakespeare (mostly *Love’s Labours Lost*) in lieu of articulation of actual feelings. The thriller plot becomes perfunctory, and although it manages to strike a decent climax, is wound up by having someone conveniently explaining everything the two lovers never got around to discovering for themselves. Laborious love lost this reader, alas.

Also noted:

New publishing house Toxic Press has made a strong opening bid to lay claim to the gonzo end of the sf market. Its launch includes reprints of Norman Spinrad’s *Bug Jack Barron* and *The Iron Dream* (Toxic, £6.99), genuine classics which crackle with informed and vigorous anger. *Bug Jack Barron*, the story of a hip, cynical TV presenter whose show exposes injustices and political scandals (written in 1969, way before Watergate, its prescience about the intersection of politics and the media still startles), was first serialized in Michael Moorcock’s *New Worlds*, and was condemned by the right-wing British press for the kind of streetwise language for which Martin Amis has since won fame. *The Iron Dream* is a febrile science fantasy supposedly authored by Adolf Hitler in an alternate history in which he became a pulp sf writer in the States, posthumously winning the Hugo for his tale of Eric Jaggart’s relentless fight against the inhuman mutant armies of the mind-controlling Dominators. It’s a brilliant act of ventriloquism (so convincing that the American Nazi party recommended it) that exposes the nastiness at the root of all too many of sf’s adolescent power fantasies.

Mark Timlin’s *I Spied a Pale Horse* (Toxic, £6.99) is a post-holocaust novel by an author best known for his Nick Sharman thrillers. A policeman sees his family die of a plague that claims almost everyone in the world, fights his way out of London, and establishes a pastoral refuge with a few like-minded men and women. Then a warlord he’s crossed kills his friends and abducts his woman, and he sets out for revenge. It’s crude, macho stuff and its storyline isn’t startlingly original, but it fizzles with rude energy, and Timlin has a gift for the narrative hook.

Paul J. McAuley



Few writers can claim a more cavalier attitude to book titles than Robert Rankin. *The Garden of Unearthly Delights* neither celebrated the delights of gardening nor offered a single gardening tip of value, while his latest, *Sex and Drugs and Sausage Rolls* (Doubleday, £16.99) contains (despite the obvious potential of at least two of the characters) nothing of sex except a few jokes about genitalia, and nothing of any drug stronger than beer. As for the sausage rolls, if there's even one between its covers, I must have blinked. Then again, this being the sixth in the Brentford Trilogy, who's counting?

Having reported in *Interzone* 149 that Rankin had made a cautious but successful foray into new territory with *Snuff Fiction*, I can now confirm that he has lost none of his grip on the old. In the past I've regretted that some of his books weren't quite to full strength, but this is proof Rankin. Pooley and Omally are the same pair of ne'er-do-wells they always were, and Brentford is, as usual, the incursion-point of choice for supernatural visitations. Indeed, on this occasion four and a bit separate visitations come along at much the same time: a party of time-travelling groupies, keen to right historic injustices and *en passant* take in some 20th-century live rock; an estranged member of that party, with his own agenda; a group whose lead singer has supernatural healing powers; a trio of demons; and a unicorn who, though his status as a visitor is more problematic (not exactly hailing from anywhere else) is most certainly of supernatural provenance. He comes into being through a typical Rankin joke, and a very good one, which those who buy the book will be able to enjoy.

And to the stories? Well, Soap Dis-tant, returning to Brentford from a long sojourn in the World Below, finds matters not quite as he recalls them. Why is Richard Branson's face on the currency? Who topped Queen Elizabeth II, and why? Was it altogether a good career-move for John (not to mention Jimi, Janice and Elvis), not to be dead any more? Of course, this has nothing to do with Omally's desire to manage Gandhi's Hairdryer (a soon-to-be-mega rock group), or everyone's desire to bed Litany, its lead singer, or why Norman Hartnell (no, not that Norman Hartnell) desires to do Jim Pooley a good turn, or someone else desires to do him a very bad turn indeed, or why one time-traveller is extremely susceptible to demonic possession, or why Small Dave the midget should have such a taste for physical violence, or why Omally should have buried a gun under his allotment shed, or whether Soap's hol-

Old Territories

Chris Gilmore

iday snaps are really fakes.

About half these questions receive some sort of answer before the book is through, and I suppose you could try placing a mental bet (a Yankee accumulator pays off best) as to which. You could also, if such is your talent, try writing settings for some of Rankin's excellent nonsense verses, and performing them yourself. Then, if you could negotiate a recording contract with an indie label, Omally might well step out of the pages of this book and manage you – not all that well, perhaps, but it wouldn't be dull, and Rankin would get the odd cheque from the Performing Rights Society. Who deserves it more?

The idea of forcing literary or mythological milieux to coexist with contemporary patterns of thought goes back at least to De Camp & Pratt's *The Incomplete Enchanter*,

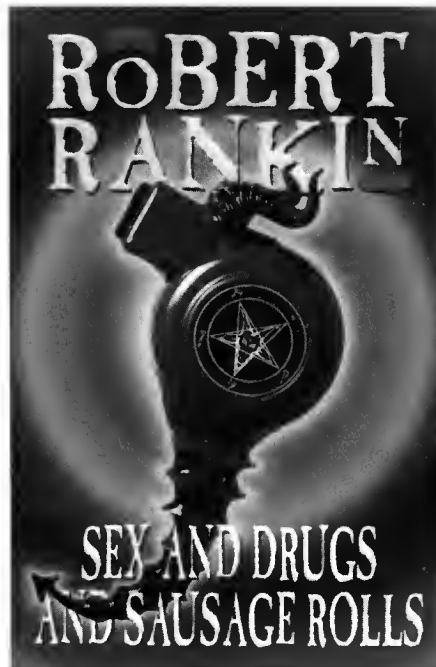
where 20th-century people found themselves living in the worlds of (among others) Norse myth and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. James Blish tried it the other way up in *Black Easter*, with the conceit that black magic as conceived by Montague Summers exists as a recognized feature of contemporary life. Such books are fun, but I'm never able to take them all that seriously; the story always seems subordinate to the writer's desire to demonstrate his wit, ingenuity and scholarship.

That's no bar to enjoyment of Tom Holt's *Snow White and the Seven Samurai* (Orbit, £15.99), which is played strictly, and very effectively, for laughs. As it's set in a world furnished mainly from European fairy tales and nursery rhymes (though Baron Frankenstein also has a bit part), it has more in common with De Camp and Pratt than Blish, though not that much more: for a shortish book, it manages a bewildering array of subplots, none of which impinge until it's more than half over.

The book is based on a single overarching conceit. You remember the magic mirror consulted by the Wicked Queen in *Snow White*? Well, in this version it runs under DOS, and her Wicked Majesty is in no less of a pickle than the rest of us computer-illiterates when someone crashes the system. And who's that someone? Good question, actually, as she has no more name than the Wicked Queen, being known only as Sis (sister of Carl, the adolescent nerd who hacked in and did the real damage). The damage itself is pretty comprehensive, since Storyland runs on Narrative Structures (or traditional plotlines) and these are being diverted, inverted and allowed to ripple into each other as the system runs out of control. The characters are no better off, as such of their long-term (core) memory as hasn't been trashed is entangled with other people's, leaving their identities dependent on cache.

A great many stories have been stirred into the broth, and even more could have been; as it happens those of *Snow White* and the *Three Little Pigs* (running in parallel) predominate. And the ending? Well, it's not exactly giving the plot away to say that everyone lives more-or-less happily ever after, but Holt achieves that in an unusual and original manner. Strongly recommended to everybody.

It's Poul Anderson's boast that he only steals from the best. As he's indisputably one of the best himself, it's only fitting that in *Genesis* (Tor, \$23.95) he has stolen wholesale and eclectically from himself. It's a short novel, fixed up from the novella of the same name, but the ideas are unusu-



ally complex. Anderson assumes that machine intelligence will very rapidly transcend the human, and thereafter succeed it. Human history will essentially cease thenceforth, as machines manage the world, and the human race, bereft of purpose, gradually dies out. There will be space travel, but only machines will practise it; only they will have the resilience to withstand its rigours, and the longevity to survive its longeurs. As an intermediate stage, however, many human personalities will be “uploaded” (most of us call it downloading, but no matter) into machines, and as the machines evolve towards a galactic supermind, they may occasionally be resurrected in one form or another for specialized purposes. This is the story of one such resurrection.

On the Earth of the far future, under a sun that will shortly nova, Gaia, the controlling intelligence, has been conducting a little experiment. She has reconstructed something not entirely unlike humanity, though of a darker complexion than any contemporary race, to re-enact human history, insofar as that's possible, against the ill-omened backdrop of the dying planet. However, for reasons I won't disclose, she has been secretive over it, and the great intelligences which are her near neighbours are growing curious. The send an emissary, Wayfarer, to investigate, and for reasons which take all Anderson's great skill to make convincing, that emissary has much of the personality of an Andersonian hero from a century or two after our own time.

This is, therefore, very much a novel of ideas, but it's also a patchwork of Anderson's preoccupations over the last half century. The opening chapter, which introduces his hero in human guise, strongly recalls his novelette “Call Me Joe,” which must in retrospect be hailed as the very first download story. The far-future Earth has much the aspect of the dying planet we met in *The Avatar*; the embedded vignettes by which he demonstrates humanity's decline recall the technique he used in *Starfarers*; while his ideas about what it might be like to be an upload had their springboard in *The Stars Are Also Fire*. Two other familiar aspects are the idea of altering history at a key point to see how differently it transpires (from *Guardians of Time*), and the desperate difficulty of rendering intelligible the thoughts of a being far more intelligent than oneself (*Brain Wave*). Nor is everything second-hand: a minor tragedy of this violet-hued book hinges on a specific and ineluctable limitation to any virtual world, which I have never seen mentioned elsewhere.

All this, some poetry and a love story too – for while they themselves

commune on a more abstract plane, Gaia and Wayfarer download “emulations” (human-seeming aspects) into a virtual matrix which allows them to appreciate what Gaia has been doing from an impurely, but completely, human perspective. It makes for a rich mix, and could, I think, have benefited from being a bit longer. Nonetheless, this is warmly recommended to all Anderson's admirers, while those who don't know him should also buy it to lay aside – until after they've read (for instance) the five books listed above.

As a final bonus, any connoisseurs of the form who buy both will be able to compare and contrast Anderson's and Holt's takes on the haiku.

*The after image
Breaks like a false dawn over
The margin of light.*

Though the old question, “What is science fiction?” has not been laid to rest, it deserves to be displaced by another, of greater subtlety: how soft can hard sf get? The trouble is, there are two variables: the softness which the writer chooses to admit (wholesale, in the cases of James Blish and Arthur C. Clarke), and the softness which admits itself willy-nilly via the writer's ignorance. Those interested could try reading *Pebble in the Sky* (Asimov), *Twilight World* (Anderson), *On the Beach* (Shute), *The Chrysalids* (Wyndham) and *This Immortal* (Zelazny). The books' places on the persistence-spectrum of radioactive pollution depend far more on their writers' backgrounds than the dates when they were written.

The above is a roundabout introduction to my observation that Alastair

Reynolds's *Revelation Space* (Gollancz, £10.99, C-format) is on the hard side, though with a mystical tinge, expressed through writing more proficient than brilliant. He has a strong technical background, and though I've got my doubts about some of his ideas, I can't, being non-technical, condemn out of hand any except his crass statement that future archaeologists of great sophistication would, after a mere million years, have difficulty distinguishing the remains of a high-tech civilization from those of primitives.

The story itself has aspects of cyberpunk (the frenetic and dehumanized lives of those whose principal and most intimate relationships are with machines), but mainly uses rather older ideas, principally cyborgs. Most of the major characters are cybernetically enhanced, and one, the corpse-captain of a bussard starship, is cryonically preserved but intermittently conscious, very much like the captain in the film *Dark Star*. All have preoccupations of a somewhat trans-human kind, and several can deploy weaponry of godlike potency, disquietingly when their various cybernetic enhancements leave them susceptible to infestation by a range of viruses, including downloads of people long dead, machine intelligences and (of course) aliens of unknown agenda.

The outcome is a tale of hyper-Jacobean intrigue, betrayal and vendetta, the principal character being driven by the pure lust for knowledge, while his principal adversaries oppose him on the plausible grounds that his researches may well trigger the end of the human race. It's a good, strong tale, briskly told despite its 200,000 words, but for me the principal interest lay in the range of sf ideas, some much older than *Dark Star*, which Reynolds has adopted. There's permitted murder, under which an assassin is hired by his victim to kill him if he can (*Immortality Delivered*); an alien race extinguished on a single day, leaving behind huge, enigmatic artefacts (*Forbidden Planet*); an intelligent, world-spanning ocean which plays tricks with your mind (*Solaris*); a hyper-camp AI (*Red Dwarf*); a hyperactive beastie erupting from someone's chest (*Alien*); an intelligence spanning an entire solar system (*The Black Cloud*); gigantic, whimsically named starships (*Consider Phlebas*, etc.) – and these are just the ones I noticed.

This is not to accuse Reynolds of plagiarism – he has his own takes on all his borrowings – but I suspect the chief interest of his book will be as a pointer to those aspects of the sf repertoire which will dominate the next decade or so.

Chris Gilmore



From chaos comes order, and from a shambles of a human being might come a thing of beauty. It happens often with artists in general, with the self-destructive impulse set against the desire to create, but the excesses and tribulations of musicians, in particular, hold an odd fascination for us. Aristotle's contention was that music is the most realistic of the arts: the manner in which the soul is moved can be adequately represented. But a musician, of course, can – indeed, some might say, should – lie through his or her teeth, through the pain. Send the listener's soul in an upward spiral, while burning your own in a private cauldron, way down there. From the cesspool comes the diamond; from the agony comes hope.

Enter Lester Young, the real-life jazz saxophonist whom Peter Straub cites as an influence for a new novella called *Pork Pie Hat* (Orion, £6.99). In America, at the end of the 1950s, a live television programme was broadcast, in which the jazz luminaries Billie Holiday, Ben Webster, Vic Dickenson, Jo Jones, Coleman Hawkins, Roy Eldridge, Rex Stewart, and of course Lester Young, were invited to play whatever they wanted. In very bad shape, Young would only live for a few more months; he needed to be helped into position, but he played. So well, in fact, did he play that Straub was led to muse, after watching the video on many occasions – after witnessing the only part of himself that Young, at the time, had been able to save – on what might have brought such a marvellous musician to his knees.

Enter the novella. For the character named Hat, the traditional perks that were foisted upon jazz players of the time – drink and drugs, easy sex – are not the real causes for his downfall. Hat, true enough, is an alcoholic, and badly malnourished by the time the first-person narrator has tracked his hero down at the start of the tale. (In fact, he's nearly dead.) By night he plays in a club, drunk, but with perfect pitch and an inspirational reach. The narrator decides that it might be a good idea to interview him, before it's too late; and Hat agrees to the proposal. The meeting takes place in Hat's room, with the musician slurping at a bottle of mother's ruin throughout. What he spells out, though, is more than the predictable catalogue of band arguments and bad decisions.

We enter the second section of the book with an account of an evening from Hat's childhood. It's Halloween. For the seasonal equivalent of a good laugh – a good scare – Hat and a friend dress up as ghosts and walk to an area of town that is well-known to

"We are the Harvest of the Centuries"

David Mathew

house lowlifes, bullies and scum. Why, then, is the good doctor also present? And what, as they approach, is that screaming? In front of their very ears a woman is murdered in a shack, and the boys conclude that no greater thrill will be obtained than to see the body.

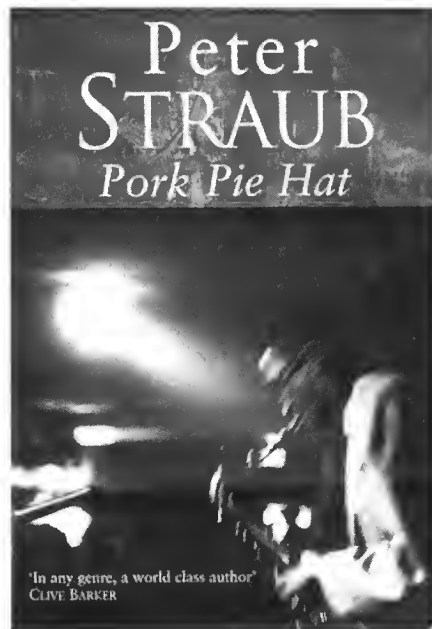
Is the sight of the corpse, which both boys recognize as that of a rich young local woman, what has led Hat into alcoholism? No. Nor, specifically, is the voodoo ceremony that they suspect is about to take place. Things become much worse for Hat and partner before the night has played out its final encore, and later it is apparent that a different woman altogether was actually killed. The rich one is alive

and kicking... But how much of this can the narrator believe? Perhaps Hat is giving, for the interview, one last performance: portrait of the artist as a liar, as we said before. So the narrator investigates, using old newspaper coverage, and stumbles upon a bizarre interweaving of stories. Inconsistent dates, paternity issues, and the realization that the area was once used for prostitution and the illegal production of booze.

Can we guess the ending? Certainly not; because Straub has managed to provide, in this excellent piece of work, a total of seven or eight plausible interpretations. This is a book with real bite, with pace, and which, as I am also a jazz fan, I loved. It is told in Straub's inimitable voice. Trust nothing but the spirit of destruction.

Order out of chaos is shown in *When Worlds Collide* by Philip Wylie and Edwin Balmer (Bison Books, \$14.95). This is part of the run that the University of Nebraska is reissuing for a contemporary readership, as part of its "Bison Frontiers of Imagination Series," which also includes *Mizora: A World of Women* (reviewed below), Jack London's *Fantastic Tales* (reviewed elsewhere), and *The Wonder* by J. D. Beresford, *The Land that Time Forgot* (Edgar Rice Burroughs), and Jules Verne's *The Chase of the Golden Meteor*. Each volume is handsomely produced, and has been given a new introduction. But a general idea of the criteria followed to determine which books would take another breath, some of them a century after initial publication – though not necessarily the most recent publication – might have been nice. Still, I hope Bison Books does well – as indeed I wished Britain's Pulp Fictions (a team committed to a similar venture) my sincere best wishes, before their operations ceased.

When Worlds Collide is actually two books, the latter – *After Worlds Collide* – following on from a successful (ish) colonization of the second of two runaway planets; a colonization made by a very select group from Earth at the end of the first volume. The title of the second does not get a look-in on the cover; but to be fair the overall title seems apt. First published in 1932, *When Worlds Collide* is firstly a pre-apocalyptic tale of two rogue bodies that are heading in the direction of our planet; and thereafter a robinsonade which depicts the characters' new life. "Bronson Alpha – which is the name frequently assigned to the larger of the two bodies – appears in the telescope similar in size to Uranus. That is, its estimated diameter is something over fifty thousand miles. Bronson Beta, which is the smaller of the two bodies, has an esti-



mated diameter of eight thousand miles... similar in size, therefore, to the earth."

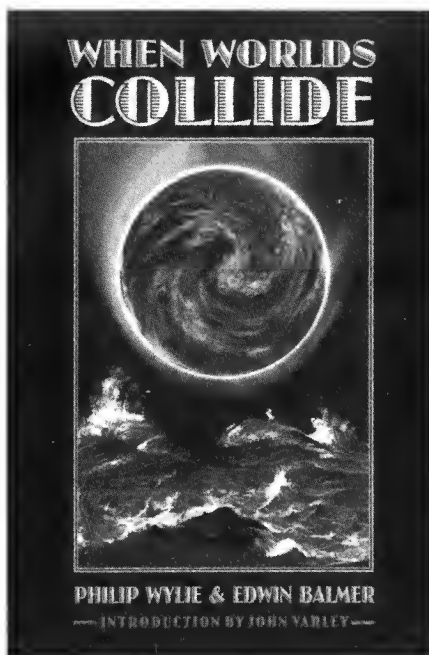
After the withholding of information has proved futile, and after some ostrich-like disbelief, spells of religious and moralistic fervour ensue; and panic becomes a language that all can speak:

"It's going to be doomsday, isn't it?"

"No, Tony more than doomsday... yet some of us here on this world, which most surely will come to an end, some of us will not die!... if we accept the strange challenge that God is casting at us from the skies!"

("More than doomsday"? Shudders!) To the scientists working in the field it is known that a near-miss dummy-run will occur, with both planets rolling by at a close enough distance to balls up the seas, causing flooding and mayhem. On the second passing, Bronson Alpha will strike, and Beta, which is deserted but was once populated, will be the one (having as it does an atmosphere similar to our own, fortuitously enough) to provide a home for whoever can make the grade and get on the winning side of the group that is building a spaceship to take its members there. The ship will be made of a newly-discovered and immensely powerful metal; and the purpose of the journey, aside from immediate self-preservation, is to construct the human race afresh. After all, it's no coincidence that the lead female character's name is Eve!

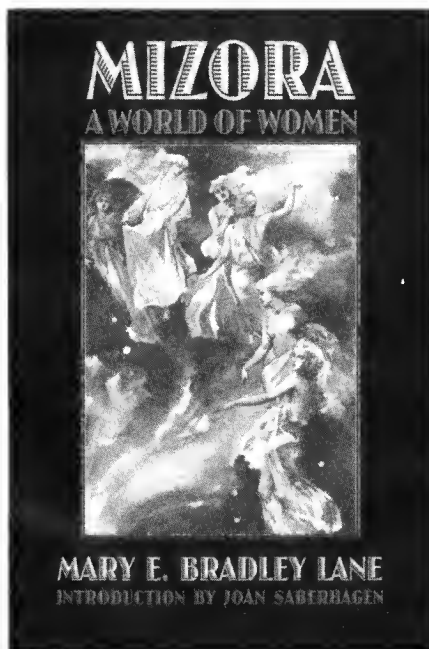
Well, of course *When Worlds Collide* is plangent hyperbole, or flabby melodrama, or both: especially chapter 13. And of course some of the dialogue reads like seminar notes, and the enterprise whiffs, here and there, of misogyny and racism – the kow-towing of the Japanese butler, in particular. But there is also a poignant moment or two when the male protagonist understands he will have to leave his mother behind. There is the lead male's chivalry, and the sweetness of glimpsing a world gone by (no pun intended): the references to cables, and so on. We must not forget when these books were written, nor indeed who wrote them. Wylie and Balmer worked together on other projects, but they were also independent talents. Balmer (1883-1959) was primarily an engineer and writer of detective and speculative fiction, but Wylie's range was probably greater. It was Wylie (1902-1971) who wrote *Generation of Vipers* (1942), with its now-questionable attitudes about masculine-feminine interdependence. Not to mention *The Disappearance* (1951), a novel which contains Wylie's thoughts (or at least the thoughts of the implied author) on what makes us male and female. (Interestingly,



though, the ponderous philosophizing in this one comes from the man.)

The scene is set for the sequel. Life on a new planet: rebuilding society, reunions with colleagues who are believed long lost; war, deaths, regeneration. The moments, however, leading up to the collision (at which point "Decillions of tons of mass [collide] in cosmic catastrophe") are tenser, more focused, more natural. Preferred. But the two volumes, back to back, are fantastic; and the introduction by John Varley is competent, if rather thin.

About Mary E. Bradley Lane, the author of *Mizora: A World of Women* (Bison Books, \$9.95) very lit-



tle is known; but Joan Saberhagen's tidy introduction condenses the available wisdom well. Apparently Lane kept it a secret from her husband that she was writing a book. It was published in 1890: an intelligent but cautious, blood-controlled feminist tract, which clearly presents a female-only existence as as much of a nightmare as any other extreme would be. And obviously, by pinpointing the ridiculous, a light is shown on the reader's reality, and especially on the way the sexes mingle. Mingle now, and mingled then; as Lane states at the end of the story, "We are the harvest of the centuries." The book puts one in mind of More's *Utopia*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Storm Constantine's *The Monstrous Regiment*, and Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*.

Prosecution, "shipwreck and disaster," and a new existence among the "Esquimaux" befall our narrator by the end of the first chapter – in which a man has been civil and friendly to her (important as a comparison with the society she encounters later). She ends up in the hollow earth, among long-living blue-eyed blonde women, who attempt to introduce her to a near-perfect new way of life, even if she fails to have the same colour of hair. Asking about the presence of men draws blank after blank: "I may mention here that no word existed in their dictionaries that was equivalent to the word 'man'... My friend's infant, scarcely two years old, prattled of everything but a father." Prudence, however, does not permit Lane to explain exactly how new children are conceived, although some hints are provided. But it might be a mistake to ignore, in the messages of domination and submission, a certain sexual subtext.

Mizora's population are hierarchically equal to one another; no distinction is observed between professions. "That there were really no dividing lines between the person who superintended the kitchen and the one who paid her for it, in a social point of view, I could plainly see." Some are cooks, some farmers, and some remarkable scientists: "They separated water into its two gases, and then, with their ingenious skill, converted it into an economical fuel." But these are not the secrets that the narrator wishes to know in detail. It is to her shock that she learns the men were eliminated 3,000 years earlier.

Ultimately, *Mizora* is tragic, of course; controversial in its exploration of crime being "as hereditary as disease," but also tragic. Friends die. Situations change. As Mary E. Bradley Lane states in the final line: "Life is a tragedy even under the most favourable conditions."

David Mathew



BOOKS RECEIVED



JANUARY 2000

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by *Interzone* during the month specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Anderson, Jack. **Millennium**. Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-87394-8, 332pp, trade paperback, \$15.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994; a piece of thrillerish "mainstreamer" sf about an alien visitation and the fate of our world at millennium's end; the author is a well-known American journalist and broadcaster; was this his debut novel? – we're not told; although it's an American book, the title spells the word "Millennium" in the British way, with two n's.) *15th January 2000.*

Asimov, Isaac. **Buy Jupiter**. Millennium, 1-85798-941-4, 255pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Harris, £6.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1975; 24 rather brief stories – Asimov's barrel-scrappings, really – interspersed with lots of easy-going autobiographical commentary.) *10th February 2000.*

Barrett, Neal, Jr. **Perpetuity Blues and Other Stories**. Foreword by Terry Bisson. Golden Gryphon Press [3002 Perkins Rd., Urbana, IL 61802, USA], ISBN 0-9655901-4-3, xi+247pp, hardcover, cover by Ron Walotsky, \$21.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; a dozen of the best stories, mostly reprinted from Asimov's, *F&SF*, *Omni* and sundry original anthologies, by an undersung

Texan writer who has published 40-odd books in various genres; this is the sixth handsome volume to be published by the late Jim Turner's Golden Gryphon Press – following the founder's untimely death, the press is continuing under the stewardship of Jim's brother, Gary L. Turner.) *February 2000.*

Baxter, Stephen. **Longtusk: Mammoth, Book Two**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06858-2, 292pp, C-format paperback, cover by Fangorn, £9.99. (Sf novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £16.99 [not seen]; second in a trilogy which tells the story of the last of the mammoths from the animals' point of view.) *20th January 2000.*

Baxter, Stephen. **Silverhair: Mammoth, Book 1**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-849-3, 277pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fangorn, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1999.) *13th January 2000.*

Bester, Alfred. **The Deceivers**. Simon & Schuster/ibooks, ISBN 0-671-03889-3, 268pp, trade paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1981; this is the American edition of September 1999, with a UK price and publication date specified; it contains a new afterword, remembering the late Alfred Bester, by Julius Schwartz and Elliott S. Maggin.) *22nd February 2000.*

Bonano, Margaret Wander. **Preternatural Too: Gyre**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86671-2, 320pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; sequel to *Pretemoturo!*.) *April 2000.*

Bowkett, Stephen. **Dreamcatcher**. "Dreamtime." Orion/Dolphin, ISBN 1-85881-652-1, 115pp, A-format paperback, £3.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first edition; the opener in a new series by various hands which looks as though it has been inspired by Neil Gaiman's Sandman: "The Dream-



time books are interlinked by the Shadowman, a dark figure cloaked in the imagery of myths from different cultures"; see also under Jenny Jones, below.) *6th January 2000.*

Brown, Richard. **The Helmet: Golden Armour, 1**. Scholastic/Hippo, ISBN 0-590-63775-4, 212pp, B-format paperback, £3.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first edition; opening volume of a tetralogy; the author appears to be British.) *19th February 2000.*

Coe, David B. **Eagle-Sage: Book III of The LonTobyn Chronicle**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86791-3, 480pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; sequel to *Children of Amorid* [1997] and *The Outlanders* [1998].) *April 2000.*

Danvers, Dennis. **End of Days**. Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-79093-9, 372pp, A-format paperback, \$6.50. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1999; the author [born 1947] is known for his werewolf novel *Wildemess* [1991], which was made into a television serial; this one is a follow-up to his first sf novel proper, *Circuit of Heaven* [1998].) *January 2000.*

Danvers, Dennis. **The Fourth World**. Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-97761-3, 336pp, hardcover, cover by David Bowers, \$23. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the hero works as "a living camera hired to record real-time events that will enhance the virtual experiences of millions of Web slaves.") *March 2000.*

Dick, Philip K. **Ubik**. "SF Masterworks, 26." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-853-1, 224pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1969; a favourite old Phildickian reality-bender; Chris Moore's striking cover painting looks like a pastiche of something by Hubert Rogers from an *Astounding* cover of the 1940s.) *10th February 2000.*

Gardner, Martin. **Visitors from Oz: The Wild Adventures of Dorothy, the Scarecrow, and the Tin Woodman**. Illustrated by Ted Enik. St Martin's Griffin, ISBN 0-312-25437-7, xvi+189pp, trade paperback, cover by Enik, \$12.95. (Fantasy sequel-by-another-hand, first published in the USA, 1998; this is perhaps the best of the many sequels, or tribute fictions, inspired by L. Frank Baum's children's fantasy *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* [1900]; the author, born 1914 and still going strong, is himself a rather wonderful man – scientist, essayist, mathematics puzzler, pseudo-science debunker, occasional sf writer; and author of the famous Lewis Carroll tribute, *The Annotated Alice*; good grief, we've just noticed: it states in the accompanying publicity sheet that this is his "debut novel" – quite an achievement for a writer in his 80s!) *January 2000.*

Gemmell, David A. **Midnight Falcon**. "A Novel of the Rigante." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14257-3, 528pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Bolton, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1999; follow-up to *Sword in the Storm*, in Gemmell's new Celtic-flavoured

series; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 149.) 9th March 2000.

Gentle, Mary. **Ash, I: A Secret History.** "A book that will take your breath away." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06901-5, 572pp, C-format paperback, £14.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; now, here is something mighty peculiar: according to the blurb, this will be "the single largest fantasy work ever... 450,000 words in one volume... 1120 pages"; clearly this bound proof represents only the first half of the forthcoming book [which has also been announced as a series of four books in the USA]; moreover, its states inside "© Mary Gentle 1998"; no such work appeared in 1998 [although it was announced]; these proofs, apart from the cover, must have been printed a couple of years ago, and are only now being circulated; inside, the author, who is already well-known for such works as *Rats and Gargoyles* and *Grunts*, is described as "a small, demented born-again redhead living north of the M25"; "born-again" – what does that mean in this context; the title character of the novel, Ash, is a tough woman mercenary, and we are told that Mary Gentle has recently completed an MA in War Studies [she seems to have dedicated her life to living down the resonances of her surname]; kind of baffling all round – but, for all that, Ash may turn out to be the fantasy event of the year.) April 2000.

Haldeman, Joe. **Forever Free.** Gollancz, ISBN 1-575-06853-1, 277pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Eggleton, £16.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1999; this, unlike his 1997 novel *Farever Peace*, which was merely a "thematic companion," is a direct sequel to Haldeman's famous 1974 novel *The Farever War*.) 20th January 2000.

Hardwick, Michael. **The Revenge of the Hound.** Illustrated by Steranko. Simon & Schuster/iBooks, ISBN 0-671-03891-5, 310pp, trade paperback, cover by Steranko, £9.99. (Horror-crime sequel-by-another-hand, first published in the USA [?], 1987; it's a Sherlock Holmes story, supposedly told by Dr John H. Watson, sequelizing A. Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*; the author, Michael Hardwick (1924-1991), was British [and husband of Mollie Hardwick, who wrote all those *Upstairs, Downstairs* TV novelizations]; he does seem to have a firmer grasp of Edwardian English tone and detail than the many American Holmes pasticheurs such as Nicholas Meyer; this is the American edition of October 1999, with a UK price and publication date specified.) 22nd February 2000.

Harness, Charles L. **Rings.** "Baroque space-time opera at its best!" Edited by Priscilla Olson. Introduction by George Zebrowski. NESFA Press [PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701-0809, USA], ISBN 1-886778-16-7, 597pp, hardcover, cover by Jane Dennis, \$25. (Sf omnibus, first edition; it contains three of this veteran author's best novels, *The Paradax Men* [1953], *The Ring of Ritamel* [1968] and

April 2000



Firebird [1981], plus a previously unpublished novel called "Drunkard's Endgame"; another hefty, well-produced NESFA volume – recommended.) Late entry: December 1999 publication, received in January 2000.

Hobb, Robin. **Ship of Destiny: The Live-ship Traders, Book III.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-225480-8, x+677pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 2000; third in the popular trilogy about living ships; "Robin Hobb" is a pseudonym for Megan Lindholm.) 6th March 2000.

Jeapes, Ben. **Winged Chariot.** Scholastic Press, ISBN 0-439-01454-9, 357pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Juvenile sf novel, first edition; Jeapes's second novel, it appears to be a very considerable expansion of a time-travel story of the same title published in *Interzone* 118 [April 1997]; at the rear there is a 20-page extract from a



forthcoming third novel by the author, a sequel to his first, *His Majesty's Starship*.) 19th February 2000.

Jones, J. V. **A Cavern of Black Ice: Book One of Sword of Shadows.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-743-9, 804pp, A-format paperback, cover by Gregg Call, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1999; Julie Jones's fifth novel.) 3rd February 2000.

Jones, Jenny. **Shadowsong.** "Dreamtime." Orion/Dolphin, ISBN 1-85881-708-0, 116pp, A-format paperback, £3.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first edition; second in a new series by various hands [see under Bowkett, above]; future titles, all by British sf/fantasy authors, are promised from Christopher Evans, Colin Greenland and Garry Kilworth.) 6th January 2000.

Joshi, S. T. **Sixty Years of Arkham House: A History and Bibliography.** Arkham House [PO Box 546, Sauk City, WI 53583, USA], ISBN 0-87054-176-5, viii+281pp, hardcover, cover by Allen Koszowski, \$24.95. (Bibliographical account of the leading American horror-fantasy-sf small press, first edition; in reality, it's a very considerable expansion and update of August Derleth's original book, *Thirty Years of Arkham House* [1970], and incorporates founding editor Derleth's historical account of the years 1939-1969; beautifully produced, as one expects from this publisher, and recommended as a "must-have" for all those who collect Arkham House editions.) 17th February 2000.

Kay, Guy Gavriel. **Lord of Emperors: Book Two of The Sarantine Mosaic.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-684-86156-9, 531pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Warner, £16.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in Canada [?], 2000; another "fantasy upon themes of Byzantium".) 20th April 2000.

Keyes, Daniel. **Flowers for Algernon.** "SF Masterworks, 25." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-938-4, 216pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1966; a Hugo and Nebula award-winner, by a writer who has produced little else, expanded from his famous *Fantasy & Science Fiction* short story of 1959.) 13th January 2000.

Kinnard, Roy. **Horror in Silent Films: A Filmography, 1896-1929.** "McFarland Classics." McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0751-4, 278pp, trade paperback, \$20. (Illustrated, annotated listing of all silent movies with horror elements; first published in the USA, 1995; UK sterling-priced import copies should be available shortly from Shelwing Ltd, 127 Sandgate Rd., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2BH; in his short but intelligent introduction Kinnard points out that "the horror film" didn't exist as a recognized genre before 1930; nevertheless, many silent films had horror ingredients, and here he sets out to give an account of them all; the result is a useful reference book for all





those interested in movies of the type.) *February 2000.*

Kotani, Eric, and John Maddox Roberts. **Legacy of Prometheus.** Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-87298-4, 268pp, hardcover,

\$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a near-future hard-science thriller which is the fifth collaborative novel by these authors [we don't recall seeing, or even hearing of, the previous four]; "Eric Kotani" is the pseudonym of Yoji Kondo [born 1933], an astrophysicist.) *April 2000.*

Lee, Samantha. **Amy.** "Point Horror Unleashed." Scholastic, ISBN 0-439-01118-3, 158pp, A-format paperback, £3.99. (Young-adult horror novel, first edition; a new entry by a British writer who has written some adult fantasy in the past.) *21st January 2000.*

Leiber, Fritz. **Farewell to Lankmar.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-850-7, 361pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £6.99. (Fantasy collection, first published in the USA as *The Knight and Knave of Swords* [1988]; originally published in this retitled version by White Wolf in the USA, this is the last in an attractive four-volume repackaging of all the late Fritz Leiber's "Fafhrd and Gray Mouser" stories.) *10th February 2000.*

Levy, Roger. **Reckless Sleep.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06899-X, 345pp, C-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £10.99. (Sf novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; a debut novel by a new British writer; the publishers boost it as "supremely assured and visionary... It combines the confident vision of Ken MacLeod, the paranoia driven plot of Philip K. Dick and a wholly original take on the sf standard of Virtual Reality.") *1st February 2000.*

McIntee, David. **Delta Quadrant: The Unofficial Guide to Voyager.** Virgin, ISBN 0-7535-0436-7, vi+330pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Episode guide to the sf TV series *Star Trek: Voyager* [1995-1999], first edition; it's unillustrated and "unofficial," but usefully packed with information, as Virgin Publishing's neat little TV programme guides always are.) *9th March 2000.*

Meyrink, Gustav. **The Golem.** Translated by Mike Mitchell. Introduction by Robert Irwin. Dedalus, ISBN 1-873982-91-7, 262pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in Germany, 1915; this translation first published by Dedalus in 1995; the classic Austrian fantasy.) *24th February 2000.*

Muir, John Kenneth. **A History and Critical Analysis of Blake's 7, the 1978-1981 British Television Space Adventure.** McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0600-3, vi+217pp, hardcover, \$38.50. (Lightly illustrated critical study of the BBC TV sf series; first edition; UK sterling-priced import copies should be available shortly from Shelwing Ltd, 127 Sandgate Rd., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2BH; this American author, who has already done

similar books on *Space: 1999* and *Dactar Who*, seems to be fairly obsessive about old British TV sf; the present volume, like the previous two, gives very full credits and episode synopses.) *March 2000.*

O'Barr, J., and Ed Kramer, eds. **The Crow: Shattered Lives & Broken Dreams.**

Illustrated by James O'Barr and others. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-41712-7, x+390pp, trade paperback, cover by O'Barr, \$14. (Horror/fantasy comic-book spinoff anthology, first published in the USA, 1998; it contains all-original stories [and a few poems] utilizing O'Barr's comic-strip character, The Crow, by A. A. Attanasio, Ed Bryant, Ramsey Campbell, Nancy A. Collins, Storm Constantine, Jack Dann, Charles de Lint, Alan Dean Foster, Caitlin R. Kiernan, Rex Miller, John Shirley, S. P. Somtow, Chet Williamson, Douglas E. Winter, Gene Wolfe, Janny Wurts, Jane Yolen and others; it's dedicated "To Brandon" – presumably a reference to Bruce Lee's son, the actor Brandon Lee, who was killed during the making of a movie based on *The Crow*, an unfortunate real-life event which seems to have been absorbed into the mythos surrounding the character.) *Late entry: 22nd November 1999 publication, received in January 2000.*

O'Shaughnessy, Darren. **Hell's Horizon: The City, Book 2.** Millennium, 1-85798-918-X, 456pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition; the second novel by this new Irish writer, sequel to his *Ayuamarca: Procession of the Dead* [1999].) *10th February 2000.*

Palmieri, Marco, ed. **The Lives of Dax.** "Star Trek." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-02840-S, xii+347pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Sf TV series spinoff anthology, first published in the USA, 1999; it contains new stories, all dealing with the long-lived female character "Dax" [actually not from *Star Trek* itself, but from

the sub-series *Deep Space Nine*, though for some reason they don't tell us that on the book's packaging] by Steven Barnes, Michael Jan Friedman, L. A. Graf, S. D. Perry, Judith & Garfield Reeves-Stevens, Kristine Kathryn Rusch and others; this is the American edition of December 1999, with a UK price and publication date specified.) *3rd January 2000.*

Paxson, Diana L. **The Book of the Stone: The Hallowed Isle, Book Four.** "A Novel of King Arthur." Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-80548-0, viii+192pp, trade paperback, cover by Tom Cauty, \$11. (Arthurian fantasy novel, first edition; last in an attractively-packaged tetralogy, the first of three of which, *The Baak of the Sward*, *The Baak of the Spear* and *The Baak of the Cauldran*, all appeared in 1999.) *January 2000.*

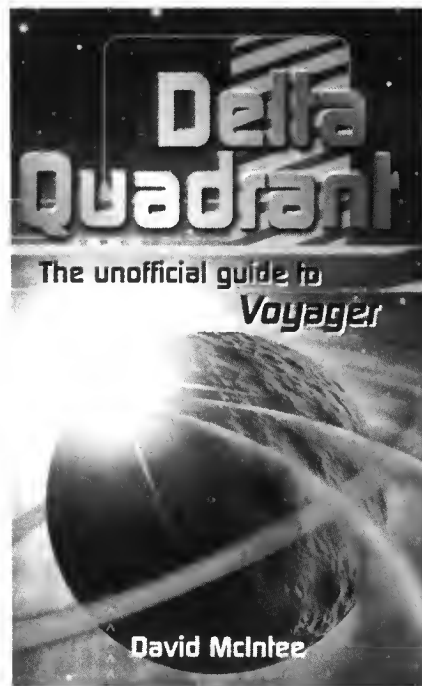
Pierce, Tamora. **First Test: Protector of the Small, 1.** Scholastic Press, ISBN 0-439-01276-7, 213pp, B-format paperback, £5.99. (Young-adult fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; the blurb invites us to: "Return to the realm of Tortall for the first part of a magical new quartet.") *21st January 2000.*

Powers, Tim. **The Drawing of the Dark.** Del Rey/Impact, ISBN 0-345-43081-6, 323pp, trade paperback, cover by David Stevenson, \$11.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1979; the second of the attractively designed "Impact" series, Ballantine/ Del Rey's new imprint name for reissues of "books that made the future"; it's inexplicable that this early novel by Powers, which some people still regard as his best, has been out of print for 20 years – the British edition, from Grafton Books, came and went in the blink of an eyelid too, and is now rare.) *Late entry: 16th November 1999 publication, received in January 2000.*

Preuss, Paul. **Arthur C. Clarke's Venus Prime, Volume One.** Simon & Schuster/iBooks, ISBN 0-671-03888-S, 328pp, trade paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £9.99. (Sf sharecrop novel, first published in the USA as *Arthur C. Clarke's Venus Prime: Breaking Strain*, 1987; it's developed from a short story which Clarke originally wrote in 1948, and there are five sequels by Preuss [reprints to come], based on other Clarke stories; this is the American edition of September 1999, with a UK price and publication date specified; irritatingly, this "iBooks" reprint specifies neither the novel's title, *Breaking Strain*, nor its original date of publication, 1987; however, there's a new five-page afterword by the author, dated March 1999, which does provide some background.) *25th January 2000.*

Rose, Malcolm. **Plague.** Scholastic/Point, ISBN 0-439-01013-6, 313pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Young-adult sf novel, first edition; a disaster thriller by one of Scholastic's more prolific British writers.) *19th February 2000.*

Schweitzer, Darrell, and Jason Van Hoiland. **Necromancies and Netherworlds:**



Uncanny Stories. Illustrated by Van Hollander. Wildside Press [S22 Park Ave, Berkeley Heights, NJ 07922, USA], ISBN 1-880448-66-1, vi+161pp, trade paperback, cover by Van Hollander, \$15. (Horror/fantasy collection; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; it contains 10 stories, the first of which ["The Crystal-Man"] is reprinted from *Interzone* 111 [September 1996], while the others come in the main from *Weird Tales* and various U.S. small-press magazines; this new volume is one of a number of Darrell Schweitzer books that are being reissued, or published for the first time, by Wildside Press – a "print on demand" publishing house which produces attractive books; see website at www.wildsidepress.com.) *Late entry: 1999 publication, received in January 2000.*

Sheckley, Robert. **Godshome.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86803-0, 251pp, trade paperback, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, \$13.95. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 142.) *January 2000.*

Smith, Kristine. **Code of Conduct.** Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-80783-1, 346pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jean Pierre Targete, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; a debut book by a new American author; human-alien adventure in a C. J. Cherryh-like vein, it comes commended by Catherine Asaro and Elizabeth Moon, and has been short-listed for the Philip K. Dick Award; one's first assumption that this must be a novel by Kristine Kathryn Rusch [who is married to fellow writer Dean Wesley Smith] proves false, as the author photo in the rear of the book is definitely not a picture of Kris Rusch, and the copyright statement specifies "Kristine C. Smith" – but this new author would have been well advised to change her byline slightly to prevent such possible confusion.) *Late entry: October 1999 publication, received in January 2000.*

Stephensen-Payne, Phil, and Virgil Utter. **Grant Allen: Hilltop Philosopher—A Working Bibliography.** "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader, Volume S2." Galactic Central Publications [2SA Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-51-1, vii+106pp, small-press paperback, £5. (Sf/fantasy author bibliography, first edition; previous bibliographies in this reliable series have been devoted to "generic" writers, from Poul Anderson to Roger Zelazny; Grant Allen [1848-1899] represents something of a departure: an older contemporary of Conan Doyle and H. G. Wells, he is best remembered for mainstream works such as his bestseller *The Woman Who Did* [1895], although he also wrote a certain amount of sf, notably some of the tales collected in *Strange Stories* [1884] and the novel *The British Borborions* [1895] – the latter was subtitled "A Hilltop Novel," hence the reference in this bibliography's title; all of Allen's many works, fiction and non-fiction, long and short, are listed here, with their dates and

places of first publication and their various reprints; recommended.) *Late entry: November 1999 publication, received in January 2000.*

Turtledove, Harry. **Darkness Descending.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86915-0, 461pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; sequel to *Into the Darkness*.) *April 2000.*

Vinge, Vernor. **A Deepness in the Sky.** Tor, ISBN 0-812-S363S-S, 775pp, A-format paperback, cover by Boris Vallejo, \$6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1999; prequel to the Hugo Award-winning *A Fire Upon the Deep*; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 144.) *January 2000.*

Vukcevic, Ray. **The Man of Maybe Half-a-Dozen Faces.** St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-24652-8, 245pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Crime novel with sf elements, first edition; it's a debut book by an American writer known for his short stories in the sf magazines and anthologies; Richard A. Lupoff commends it on the back cover as "Hamilton Cleek meets Sam Spade in cyberspace!"; rather endearing that Lupoff thinks anyone will remember who Hamilton Cleek was ["Chameleon-like hero of a series of fantastic detective stories by the American writer Thomas W. Hanshaw... appears in *The Man of the Forty Faces* (1910), etc." according to David Pringle's *Imaginary People: A Who's Who of Fictional Characters*, 2nd ed., Scolar Press, 1996].) *February 2000.*

Weaver, Tom. **Poverty Row Horrors!: Monogram, PRC and Republic Horror Films of the Forties.** McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0798-0, xvi+376pp, trade paperback, \$25. (Illustrated filmography of low-budget 1940s Hollywood horror movies; first published in the USA, 1993; UK sterling-priced import copies should be available shortly from Shelwing Ltd, 127 Sandgate Rd., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2BH; splendidly detailed accounts of some splendidly trashy films; expertly done.) *March 2000.*

Weaver, Tom. **Return of the B Science Fiction and Horror Heroes: The Mutant Melding of Two Volumes of Classic Interviews.** McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0755-7, xi+413pp + xiii+448pp, trade paperback, \$30. (Omnibus of two illustrated collections of interviews with sf/horror film actors, directors, producers, writers and technicians; first edition in this form; the separate volumes were originally published in the USA as *Interviews with B Science Fiction and Horror Movie Makers*, 1988, and *Science Fiction Stars and Horror Heroes*, 1991; UK sterling-priced import copies of this very fat combined volume should be available shortly from Shelwing Ltd, 127 Sandgate Rd., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2BH; most of the material is reprinted from magazines such as *Fongorio* and *Starlog* [in expanded form]; the interviewees include John Agar, Samuel Z. Arkoff, Hazel Court, David Duncan, Gene Fowler, Jr., Gordon Hessler, Kim Hunter, Nancy Kovack, Janet Leigh, Richard Matheson, Ib J.

Melchior, Lee Sholem, Curt Siodmak and many others more obscure; recommended to all those who like movie-related interviews.) *April 2000.*

Welch, Jane. **The Lord of Necron: Volume Three of The Book of Ond.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-671-77346-1, S12pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a quote from *The Bookseller* describes Welch as a "wonderful author in the Robert Jordan mould.") *7th February 2000.*

Westfahl, Gary, ed. **Space and Beyond: The Frontier Theme in Science Fiction.** "Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy, Number 87." Greenwood Press, ISBN 0-313-30846-2, vii+207pp, hardcover, \$59.95. (Collection of essays on aspects of space-travel in sf, first edition; in due course it will probably be available in the UK from Eurospan, 3 Henrietta St., London WC2E 8LU; it contains 23 pieces of varying lengths, many of them first delivered as papers at the Science Fiction Research Association/J. Lloyd Eaton Conference on sf held in Long Beach, California, in June 1997; the internationally diverse contributors include Michael Cassutt ["Way Station—The Motion Picture"], Donald M. Hassler ["New Worlds for Old"], Peter Nicholls ["Big Dumb Objects and Cosmic Enigmas"], David Pringle ["What is This Thing Called Space Opera?"], Janeen Webb ["Cyberspace: The Moral Dimension"] and Jack Williamson ["On the Final Frontier"], among many others; recommended, as are all volumes written or edited by our prolific academic friend and *Interzone* columnist, G. Westfahl.) *February 2000.*

Wilson, Charles. **Game Plan.** St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-25321-4, 293pp, hardcover, cover by Herman Estevez, \$24.95. (Sf technothriller, first edition; it features intelligence maximization via the implanting of chips in the brain; American writer Wilson [who should not be confused with the Canadian-resident sf novelist Robert Charles Wilson], has already achieved best-sellerdom with earlier sf-tinged thrillers with titles like *Direct Descendant*, *Embryo* and *Extinct*.) *January 2000.*

Also Received:

Spectrum SF 1. Edited by Paul Fraser. Spectrum Publishing [PO Box 10308, Aberdeen AB11 6ZR], ISSN 1468-3903, 160pp, B-format paperback, £3.99. (Quarterly British sf magazine in book form, with perhaps more of the feel of an anthology than a magazine; it contains solid new stories by Keith Brooke & Eric Brown, Garry Kilworth, Alastair Reynolds and Charles Stross, plus part one of a serialized novel by Keith Roberts, a short editorial, and brief book and film reviews; cleanly produced, with a non-pictorial colour cover; recommended.) *February 2000.*



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ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION. Wanted, *Astounding* (British edition) for January 1942. Will pay up to £60 depending on condition. J. L. Ingham, 41 Rosemary Avenue, Lower Earley, Reading RG6 5YQ. Tel. 0118-986 9071

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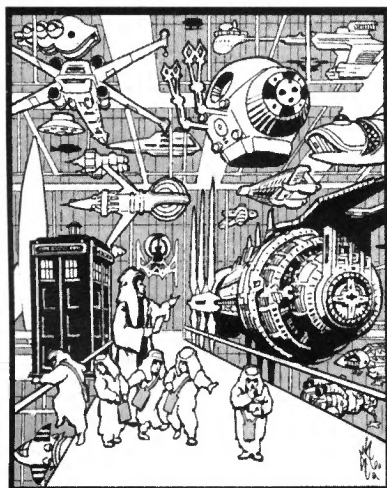
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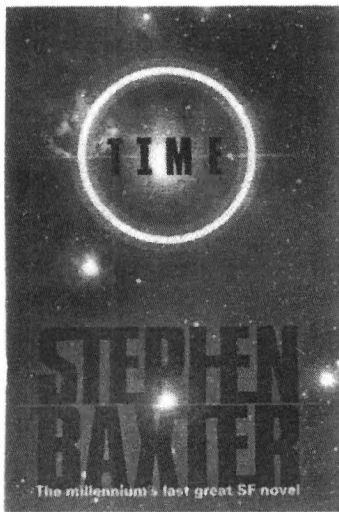
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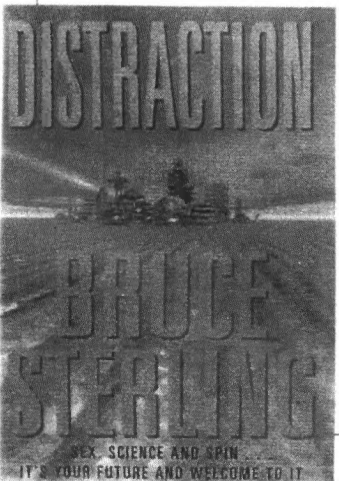


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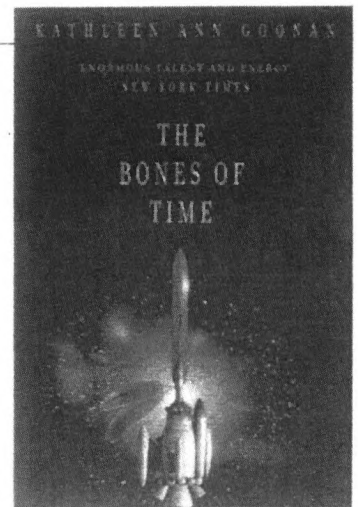
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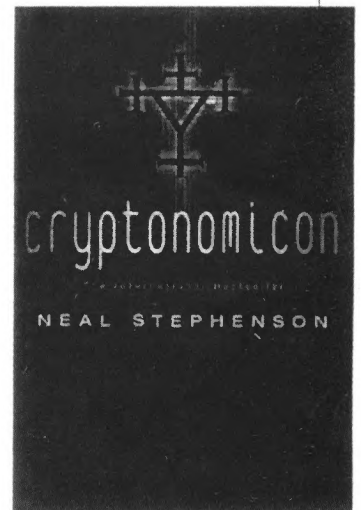
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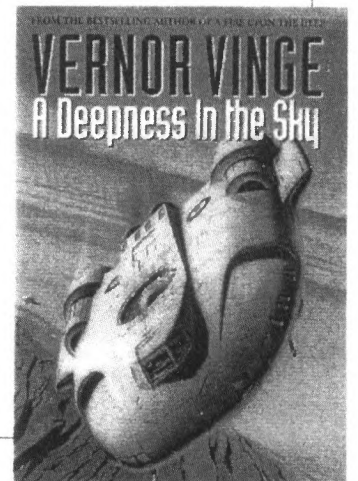


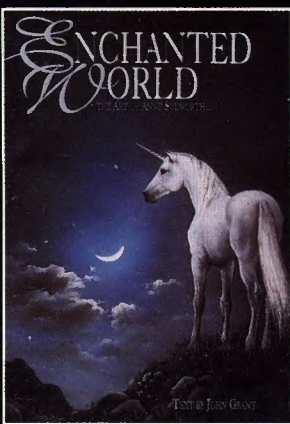
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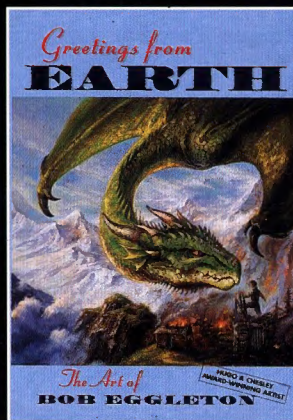
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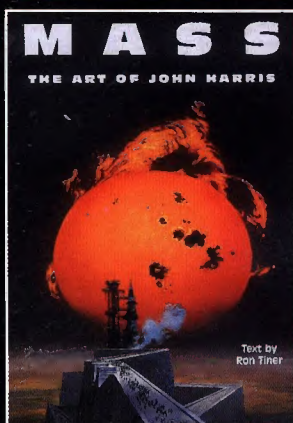
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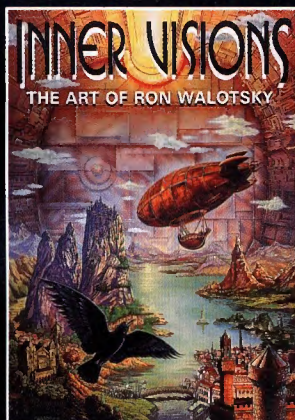
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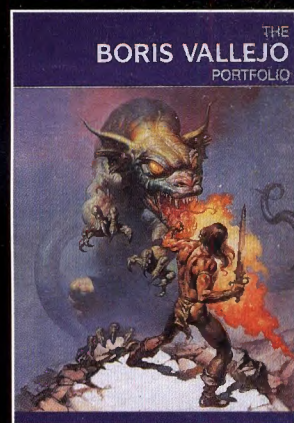


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